

FILM,
FOLKLORE,
AND URBAN
LEGENDS



MIKEL J. KOVEN

Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends

Mikel J. Koven



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Introduction

For the past ten years or so, I have focused much of my research on the relationship between urban legends and popular cinema. *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends* is a collection of some previously published articles I have written on this subject. One of my reasons for wanting to republish these essays is that they originally appeared in some obscure publications and remain known to only a select few. With this book, I hope to broaden the debate beyond the narrow confines of folklore studies. And this gives me the opportunity to correct some foolish mistakes I made in their initial publication. So, far from being some kind of “Greatest Hits” collection of singles trying to pass itself off as a new album, these papers have been reworked and restructured into a single book that I hope demonstrates a coherent and explicit trajectory.

I have structured the book into five parts: part I is a survey of much of the previously produced research into the folklore/film debates, predominantly from the perspective of folklore studies. These arguments, like the ghosts I talk about in chapter 10, keep coming back to haunt the folklore/film discussions, when most of them belong to a kind of conservatism no longer prevalent in folkloristics. It is my hope that by including this chapter in this current book, we can move the discourse forward.

Part II is about methodology and features three chapters. Chapter 2 looks at the film *The Wicker Man* through the lens of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which both director Robin Hardy and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer used as a primary source for the film. Such a “folklore reconstruction” is a highly

dubious methodology, I argue, and this chapter explores some of the problems in uncritical reproductions of folklore. Chapter 3 explores the problems in using the Aarne-Thompson tale-type and motif indexes in identifying traditional narrative forms in popular cinema (in this case, in the modern zombie movie). This chapter does not argue that such a methodology is *unproductive*, merely that, like folkloric reconstruction, it is highly problematic. Chapter 4 first continues the project started in chapter 3 (using the Aarne-Thompson indexes for filmic analysis) but in a different genre—the comedy. Like with the zombie film, trying to identify traditional tale-types and motifs proves difficult and inconclusive. However, as a step forward, I propose using Walter Ong’s concept of the “psychodynamics of orality” in order to come to a new appreciation of the kind of comic narrative most film critics dismiss out of hand. Ong’s concept of orality may be one of the more productive methodologies for seeing cinema from a folklore perspective.

Part III looks at belief. Beliefs—and the discourses of belief—lie at the core of legend telling, and the two chapters in this part discuss those debates, first in reference to two illustrative episodes of the television series *The X-Files* and then to the cycle of killer bee movies from the 1970s. In two very different ways, these chapters explore how film and television narratives are built on already existing popular culture beliefs but also how films and television shows recycle those beliefs back into popular culture.

Urban legends are the organizing principle of part IV. The first of these two chapters outlines a typology for the study of legends in popular film. In order to properly analyze how popular culture disseminates legends, this typology enables us to be more precise in the kinds of adaptation processes available to filmmakers and television writers/producers. The second of these chapters looks at what the legends and, by extension, the films based on those legends might mean through seeing the slasher films of the late 1970s/early 1980s as scripts for social control. There is a further dimension to this chapter insofar as it also demonstrates the challenges to the dominant paradigms of horror film scholarship when one looks at these films *as* legends. The standard interpretation of the slasher film as being motivated by the psycho-killer’s punishment for sexual activity is directly challenged by reframing the debate on contemporary teenage fears relevant to their liminal position between childhood and adulthood.

The final two chapters that make up part V of this book are about ostension—the “acting out” or performing of legends. In the first, I look at the film *Candyman* not only as *about* ostension but also as suturing the film’s own audience into taking an ostensive position by watching the film. Likewise, in the final chapter, I look to the British reality TV series *Most Haunted* as a

kind of ostension as well but also conclude by drawing together a number of threads this book has raised regarding seeing popular culture through the lens of folklore studies.

Taken together, these ten chapters summarize my thoughts and work looking at the convergence of traditional folklore with contemporary popular culture. None of these chapters is meant to be definitive; rather, they introduce some key terms of folkloristics, specifically in legend studies, into film studies. And these chapters are meant to redefine for folklore studies what and how we can engage within popular film and television debates.

PART ONE

THE STUDY OF
FOLKLORE AND FILM

CHAPTER ONE



Folklore and Film

In an issue of *Contemporary Legend*, Paul Smith (1999) began by decrying the seeming dearth of folkloristic scholarship on popular film. The author noted that “there is perhaps a certain irony in the fact that, while such films as *Candyman* (1992) recognize the role of the folklorist as collector of contemporary legends, very little attention has been given by folklorists to the role of the film and television industry as users and disseminators of contemporary legends” (138). Smith went on to give a short list of those few folklorists who have published on popular film and contemporary, or “urban,” legend. Granting that Smith’s focus, on urban legends specifically, is necessarily a limited one, he does omit a number of facets whereby academic folklorists can explore popular film and television.

Folklore studies have examined, or at least recognized the importance of examining, popular cinema from a number of perspectives. At one level, folklorists are able to observe and trace the process of homogenizing cultural expressions through the mass media. On the other hand, a great deal of folklore scholarship has explored those traditional narrative types and motifs when they appear in popular film and television, what I call, disparagingly, “motif spotting.” Yet, still other folklorists have noted further areas for fruitful exploration of popular culture, such as how these texts reflect contemporary belief traditions, ethnographies of fan culture, the rituals involved with popular cultural consumption, narratives about technology and technological industries, and the existence of multiple versions of seemingly fixed texts. These contributions to folkloristics need enumerating. Since 1989, when

Bruce Jackson wrote “From the Editor: Wars Don’t End” in the *Journal of American Folklore*, wherein he, like Smith, decried the absence of systematic research into folklore and film, much has been published. This chapter is about enumerating the various debates within folklore studies about popular film and television, and, albeit in a secondary capacity, also looking for those few instances where folklore has had an impact on film studies.

Märchen and the Movies

In 1946, Stith Thompson (1977) recognized cinema as both a marvelous channel of tale dissemination and a kind of storytelling event:

The cinema, especially the animated cartoon, is perhaps the most successful of all mediums for the presentation of the fairy tale. Creatures of the folk imagination can be constructed with ease and given lifelike qualities. Undoubtedly the best of these performances up to the present time [1946] is the Walt Disney production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937]. Many adults who had long ago dropped their interest in the fairy tale unexpectedly found great pleasure in this old product of the folk imagination. (461)

For Thompson, tale dissemination via cinema would, he felt, encourage viewers to rediscover these tales. He marveled at the fact that one single text could reach so many people at the same time. Within Thompson’s approach to filmed fairy tales was the implicit recognition that the Disney text would be considered but one text among countless other variants.

Ceding Thompson’s implicit recognition, later theorists, both within folklore studies and beyond, saw the cinema, especially the Disney texts, as an attempt to become definitive, thereby solidifying a single variant. Peggy Russo (1992) observed that traditional narratives “can . . . be replaced by *bogus visual versions of themselves*” (19, emphasis added). Russo traced the attack against Disney at least as far back as 1965, when

in a . . . letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, Frances Clark Sayer criticized Disney “for his debasement of the traditional literature of childhood.” Sayer accused him of: (1) lack of respect for the “integrity of original creations”; (2) “manipulation and vulgarization” of text for his own ends; (3) lack of regard for the “anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths” of folklore; (4) “fixing his mutilated film versions in books which are cut to a fraction of their original forms”; and (5) “illustrations of those books with garish pictures, in which every prince looks like a badly drawn portrait of Cary Grant; every princess a sex symbol.” (21)

The Disney Corporation's fixing of their variants into book form (and, in Sayer's opinion, the low quality of that form) clearly implicated Disney in assuming ownership of folk narratives by the creation of hegemonically "definitive" texts. This perception is that the movies fix traditional narratives into single "definitive" texts that replace the more fluid oral variants. Linda Dégh (1994a) noted,

In the global village (to use the apt term of Marshall McLuhan) created by the media, a new communality has formed on the basis of the homogenizing effect of uniform information and the mass-marketing of stories to a mass society structured into occupational, ethnic, age, sex, religious, and other population groups, also identifiable as folk or folklore-transmitting communities. The even flow of identical information systematically enculturates the citizens of the world, turning them into the consumers of identical cultural goods by creating a symbolic egalitarian social order that supersedes segmentation by national boundaries. (23)

Dégh seems to indicate that folklorists often felt that popular culture, especially through such media as film and television, attempted to homogenize divergent cultures into a single, unified system of consumerists. Local cultures and regional variants, it was felt, were in jeopardy of being taken over by this popular-culture juggernaut.¹

For example, Gerald Thomas (1980) noted the role television soap operas played in the Franco-Newfoundland storytelling tradition. Thomas recognized that the same word, *contes*, was used to refer to both soap operas and to orally told traditional folktales. He ascribed "enough similarity between the real life of French Newfoundlanders (and others) and the soap opera plots to suggest a high degree of personal identification" (343). What Thomas focused on is the similarity between the two media along traditional narrative formations: specifically Axel Olrik's "Law of Two to a Scene" in soap-opera cinematography and narrative structure (347). However, Thomas also pointed out that soap operas influenced oral folktale performance in the community: before widespread television reception in the region, storytelling performances were more heavily gesticulated, and he hypothesized that the more static style of current folktale performance was due to the influence of television drama and its static performance style (348).

Although Thomas made an important observation, the main thrust of his article was the loss of traditional performance styles, and this was in keeping with the perception of the devolutionary influence of the mass media. In the same vein, Elizabeth Tucker (1992) viewed the influence of

mass-mediated versions of narratives as replacing the oral variants previously in circulation. This coincided with Sayer's point that Disney versions of traditional fairy tales replaced the original orally circulated text and thereby created a sense of canonicity. Tucker's research was geared to demonstrate that children today were allowing video narrative texts to predetermine their own storytelling performance styles: "None of them [the children studied] used anything but video versions as starting points for narrations; to this extent, I can assert that videotape is overshadowing traditional print versions of stories" (25). That being said, Tucker noted the *importance* of video-mediated narrative in developing children's storytelling repertoires. She mentioned a narrative variant of "Cinderella" told to her by a four-year-old informant named Emily, who fused the romantic fairy tale with a vampire story.

There was no conflict in her mind between the plot structure of Cinderella and the plot of a typical vampire movie, which seems to be the other model for narration here; she simply took what she wanted from both sources and put them together into her own story. While at least one child in the audience wanted to make sure that the name "Cinderella" was clearly mentioned, Emily knew what she wanted to do and had the confidence in her own skills as a storyteller. (28)

Tucker's article developed Sylvia Grider's (1981) observation that children frequently reiterate plot narratives from their favorite television shows and movies but that these reiterations are highly complex and original storytellings. Grider labeled these narrations "media narraforms," defining them "[as embodying] a symbiotic relationship between the media and oral tradition: the media provide the content, and oral tradition provides the situations and format for the performance of these contemporary, hybrid narratives" (126). Likewise, Kay Stone (1981) noted that Disney's filmed versions of traditional fairy tales, by the retention of the fantastic elements in these stories, allowed the child's imagination to be developed.

Like Grider and Stone, Tucker also recognized that

while we should keep an eye on children's involvement with VCRs, we needn't be too concerned about creativity being wiped out by repeated viewings of stories on videotape. At *present* there seems to be a productive interdependence between the TV screen and that old-fashioned storytelling device, the mouth. (31, *emphasis added*)

Tucker noted that although both the mass-mediated and the orally transmitted narratives were at the time able to survive concurrently, such coexistence

was likely to be temporary. Implicit in her article is the idea that both could not survive and that the oral was the more likely to die out so that the mass mediated could flourish and dominate.

Studies such as those by Tucker, Thomas, and Russo debated whether mass-mediated texts can be considered folklore, primarily because of their medium of transmission. S. Elizabeth Bird (1996), conversely, did not see the means of transmission as problematic:

We need to forget about whether or not popular culture “transmits” folklore. Rather, we begin to consider that certain popular culture forms succeed because they act like folklore. To some extent they may have replaced folk narratives, but not with something completely new. Thus popular culture is popular because of its resonance, its appeal to an audience’s existing set of story conventions. (345)

It is this development, of the ways in which popular culture can behave like traditional folklore forms, that many current studies build on. I have argued elsewhere (1999a) how films like *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995) reproduce women’s speech patterns, narrative contexts, and structures or how *Schindler’s List* (1993) can function as ritual storytelling, akin to the Jewish Passover retellings of the Exodus from Egypt (Koven 1998).

Beyond Documentary Cinema: A Neglected Area?

Bruce Jackson (1989) commented that, by and large, folklorists have neglected to examine feature film and television as an area of study, even to the extent that Dorson’s *Handbook of American Folklore* “ignores films entirely” (388). Or, rather, Dorson’s *Handbook* ignored the *feature fiction film* as an area of folkloristic study, as there are three chapters, two of which are methodological (Blaustein 1983, 397–401; Sherman 1983, 441–46) and one presentational (Carey 1983, 507–12), on the ethnographic *documentary* film and videographic methods of field collection.

A major and in-depth consideration of the ethnographic film falls outside the purview of this study, but Sharon Sherman (1981) focused almost exclusively on a particular manifestation of the ethnographic film, what she called the *folkloric* film: “Any film having folkloric content might be of use to us, but those films called folkloric films . . . are ones which deal primarily with topics folklorists study and whose intent is to meet the dictates of folk-

loristic research and teaching” (16). We might potentially call any film folkloric, but true folkloric films are made by trained folklorists or were made in close consultation with folklorists (Sherman 1996). It is important to recognize here that Sherman exclusively studied the documentary film, not popular-fiction films:

Many folklorists who use film are tied to the models adopted by their documentary-film forerunners and to the conceptual premises of past-folklore scholars. Thus, in folkloric films, the rural often takes precedent over the urban, and the past assumes greater importance than the contemporary. (264)

Implicit in Sherman’s work is a privileging of the documentary film as the sole discourse for folkloristics. Sherman did note the existence of folkloristic and ethnographic detail within nonfolkloric (i.e., nondocumentary) films, albeit in passing:

A unique twist to the study of film and folklore is the popular use of folklore as the primary plot line or unifying thread for commercial feature films. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), for example, exploits the practices of voodoo. The urban legend about a baby-sitter frightened by a telephone caller is the basis for *When a Stranger Calls* (1979). The film *Avalon* (1990) plays upon family and ethnic narratives to structure the larger narrative of family and ethnic-neighborhood dissolution in the America of the 1940s through the 1960s, using one family as exemplar. *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) relies on the courtship narratives of many different couples as a transition device. (265)

Karl Heider (1976) perhaps best illustrated the main difference between the ethnographic film and the fiction film when he noted,

In some sense we could say that all films are “ethnographic”: they are about people. . . . There are many films which have little pretension to ethnographicness but which are of great interest to the ethnographer. I personally feel that *The Last Picture Show*, about the high school class of 1952 in a small Texas town, is a statement which captures the culture of my own high school class of 1952 in Lawrence, Kansas. Likewise, *The Harder They Come* (about Jamaica), *Scenes from a Marriage* (about middle-class Swedish marriage), or *Tokyo Story* all present important truths about cultural situations. As statements (native statements, in fact) about culture, these films are important, and they could very easily be used as raw data or documents in ethnographic research. I am tempted to call them more than just “raw data” and think of them as “naïve ethnography.” (5)

For Heider as well as for Sherman, the feature fiction film can be seen as *native ethnography*; that is, although they are neither *ethnographic* (documentary) nor made by/for ethnographers, the filmic materials may be of *interest* to ethnographic audiences because the fiction film often depicts an insider's perspective, often complete with an emergent context. However, both perceptions are somewhat limiting insofar as they see popular cinema as tangential to the larger projects of folklore/ethnography. To paraphrase Jackson (1989), such assumptions are neither fair nor accurate, as some folklorists *have* explored popular cinema. Let me now move on to those scholars who have researched popular cinema in folkloristic terms in order to demonstrate some of these points of conversion.

Motif Spotting—Myth, Märchen, and Legend

One area of popular film that Jackson (1989) recognized folklorists have considered is the area of folklore *in* film:

With ordinary film, it's usually a matter of folklore *in* film, the equivalent of folklore in Faulkner or folklore in Shakespeare . . . things to be plucked out of a context otherwise lacking folkloric moment. *JAF* [*Journal of American Folklore*] regularly reviews films about folklore events or folk processes or folk performers, but it has never published a review or article dealing with feature films or television narratives. (388)

Some folklore studies have emerged that seek to enumerate folklore types and motifs when they occur in popular media, in other words, studies that engage in motif spotting.

Motif spotting takes its methodology from the debates surrounding “folklore and literature.” It has been suggested that the most direct way for individual fiction films to be considered “folklore” is to follow some of the theoretical writings that tie folklore studies to literature. Neil Grobman (1979), for example, proposed that one must assess “how authors use folklore in their writings” (17). Following this procedure requires the scholar to identify the author as being in direct contact with folklore and its scholarly debates. The problem with applying the “folklore and literature” debates to discussions about folklore and popular cinema is that literary texts are produced by individual authors whose connection with “folk culture” is more readily provable. Cinema and television are much more collaborative communicative media, and, therefore, if one is required to make a connection between the

text and “legitimate” folk culture, whose connection is to be considered authoritative?²

When folklorists have looked at popular mass-mediated texts, they did so in order to identify traditional tale-types and motifs in films. Diverse scholars like Leslie Fiedler and Harold Schechter noted the similarities between Vietnam War movies and traditional hero narratives. Both authors saw in movies like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (Fiedler 1990) and *Rambo* (1985) and *Platoon* (1988) (Schechter and Semeiks 1991) similarities between these “original” texts and the expression of the American “Frontier Myth,” to use Schechter and Semeiks’s phrase. The myths expressed in those films, as Fiedler (1990) noted, “represent a symbolic effort to bring back home again what we hope can be recuperated in imagination if not in fact: a not ignoble part of us all squandered in an ignoble war [the Vietnam War]” (399). Schechter and Semeiks (1991) likewise noted that in the Vietnam War film, the American hero myth was regenerated for the 1980s moviegoing audience. They argued that *Rambo* and *Platoon* engaged American audiences with traditional hero narratives. *Platoon* was an initiatory rite, while *Rambo* was a captivity–escape tale. This appeal to traditional narrative patternings accounts for the films’ success and not the critical assumption of a decline in the audience’s taste. If history were unable to appeal to a cultural perception of the American self, so their arguments went, then through the medium of popular cinema, the culture could regenerate its own sense of worth by righting the wrongs retrospectively, even if only in the context of a fiction film. These are highly functionalist arguments that posited that cinema played itself out for a cultural audience that needed to see its own self-perceptions reified.³

Folklorists have also been concerned with the identification of folktale tale-types and motifs in popular cinema. For some scholars, the Disney effect, taking traditional tales and turning them into mass-mediated and authoritative texts, as Peggy Russo and Frances Clark Sayer noted, could have a potentially detrimental effect on the transmission of these tales. In this light, Thompson’s affection for Disney movies seems overly optimistic: as a trained and professional folklorist, Thompson was in the ideal position of recognizing that Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, for example, was but one variant of the narrative tradition, but he saw no indication that children or adults would see these cinematic texts as authoritative. Another point Sayer raised was that these films frequently sanitize the narratives to be so inoffensive as to be almost meaningless: “Sayer argued that Disney ‘sweetens’ or removes the conflict in folklore that allows children to learn the ‘tragic dimension of life, the battle between good and evil, be-

tween weak and strong . . . [and] all that is good in the human spirit” (Russo 1992, 21).⁴

Elsewhere, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1979) asked a stimulating question: given their assumption of a “decline” in the magical worldview, why do television advertisements appeal frequently to magical aspects of the products they are flogging? The authors have understood the folktale as a fictitious genre, and the “realistic” setting of television advertisements are mere facade. The television commercial is the American adult equivalent of the folktale, for example, magical assistance and promise of riches beyond our dreams. They also discussed how beliefs were manipulated under the fictitious surface of television advertising.

In spite of the seemingly obvious recourse to Disney films and the less obvious discourse of television advertising, the dominant area for the identification of traditional tale-types and motifs was the horror movie. This genre appeared to be the one place, next to television advertising, where the magical worldview that the folktale purports could exist without being questioned in a secular context. Of course different forms of magic exist within any number of sacred-belief traditions, but for the *secular* world, the horror film’s population of monsters, devils, and “hook-handed” killers allowed the “suspension of disbelief” of their existence to function based on the verisimilitude of this genre to the folktale.

Alex Alexander (1979) noted the similarities in *Carrie* (both the novel by Stephen King [1975] and the film by Brian De Palma) and the “Cinderella” story. This horror story about a young girl who discovers her telekinetic abilities on the eve of her high school prom was told as a modern variant on the traditional fairy tale. Alexander made the easy equation between prom and ball and between her evil mother with the evil stepmother of the folktale. There is even a motif from the “Ugly Duckling” folktale where the ugly duckling turns into a beautiful swan in *Carrie*’s movement from gawky adolescent to beautiful young woman at the prom, a motif also present in some of the Cinderella versions.

Harold Schechter (1988) also addressed De Palma’s *Carrie*, noting the similarity to folktale-like narratives with which he was familiar. In particular, Schechter dealt with the final image of the film, where *Carrie*’s arm, as he describes it, “suddenly erupts from the grave” (27). He noted the same motif, of an arm emerging from the grave (or similar surface), in such films as *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Deliverance* (1974) (in both cases, the arm breaks the surface of a lake). The same image was used to advertise the film *The Evil Dead* (1984). Schechter traced this single motif back to the Grimm Brothers and their story “The Willful Child” (29).⁵ The significance of this observation was that regardless of a film’s sophistication or its technical complexity, the images

a filmmaker uses to tell his or her story are often analogues to traditional folktales. Schechter took these analogues even further:

to look once more at *Carrie*, however—what we see there . . . is an even more intriguing phenomenon: a pop entertainment which does not simply project nightmares and dabble in dangerous fantasy, but which contains precise parallels to particular and widespread primitive taboos, specifically ones dealing with . . . the dead. (32)

Schechter had likewise done a similar study on the “bosom serpent” motif in American folklore and drawn parallels to popular cinematic representations. He summarized the bosom serpent story thus: “through some unfortunate circumstance or act of carelessness . . . a snake . . . is accidentally ingested by, or grows inside the body of, the unlucky individual, where it remains until it is expelled or in some way lured out of the victim’s body” (20). The well-known sequence in Ridley Scott’s film *Alien* (1979) most clearly demonstrates this motif, where an unlucky crew member of a space mining expedition is impregnated with an alien life form in his chest that bursts out during the crew’s supper. As Schechter noted, “like the traditional, oral versions that have been popular for hundreds of years, [the sequence in *Alien*’s] only purpose is to produce emotional response: shock, revulsion, morbid fascination” (23).

In the 1990s, horror movies and series of horror movie franchises have emerged based even more explicitly on folktales than the *Carrie* example. Horror-movie audiences have been presented with adult-oriented versions of traditional tales, such as *Snow White*, subtitled *A Tale of Terror* (1997), and *Rumpelstiltskin* (1995). In addition, fans of the genre would be familiar with the *Leprechaun* series (1993, 1994, 1995, and 1996) or even *Pinocchio’s Revenge* (1996). But this tradition of making adult-oriented films out of Märchen is not new: the French surrealist poet, filmmaker, and artist Jean Cocteau made *La belle et la bête*, an adult reworking of “Beauty and the Beast,” in 1946. Cocteau’s *La belle et la bête* is also noteworthy for blending the genre of fairy tale with the horror film, and, as I demonstrate later, the horror genre’s connection is also to the legend. Cocteau filmed the Beast’s castle in such a way as to be familiar to anyone who grew up on the haunted-house movies of the 1930s. In many respects, what Cocteau did in *La belle et la bête* is return the folktale to its adult audience by appropriating the visual iconography of the contemporary horror movie.⁶

Finally, special mention should be made of Frank Hoffmann’s research, as we move in this survey from adult-oriented Märchen to *adult* Märchen.

In his 1965 article “Prolegomena to a Study of Traditional Elements in the Erotic Film,” Hoffmann noted that pornographic and “stag” films utilize a number of traditional tale-types and motifs. Basing his study on the collection of films held at the Kinsey Institute of Sexual Research, the author wrote,

I have seen and taken notes on approximately 280 of the Institute’s collection of 400 [pornographic films]. Of these, close analysis reveals that 175—or better than 60 percent—contain recognizable folkloristic elements. Many of these can be related directly to existing motifs in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, whereas others relate to new motifs which I have developed out of my analysis of collections of erotic folktales. (145)

Within legend scholarship, Julia George (1982) noted that “many non-ethnographic fiction films seem to exhibit elements of folk narrative, transposed into a visual rather than primarily an oral mode of transmission. The structure of film, as well as the themes, present often parallel traditional storytelling methods” (159). She also noted that the horror film in particular shares “components of structure and function” of urban legends (159). She applied Alan Dundes’s three steps of legend narrative structure to the horror film—interdiction, violation, and consequences—and concluded that “horror stories function to scare and to warn; the same seems to apply to horror films” (176). I discuss George’s article in more detail in chapter 3.

Larry Danielson’s (1979) “Folklore and Film: Some Thoughts on Baughman Z500–599” notes the utilization of urban legend motifs in horror movies, specifically John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). He wrote that many horror movies drew heavily on what Ernest Baughman classified as motifs Z500–599, “stories which are not ghost or witch stories—they usually do not deal with the supernatural—which are told because of the effect of horror they produce in the listener. Usually the emphasis is on the grisly or strange rather than on the supernatural” (Baughman, quoted in Danielson 1979, 211). Significantly, Danielson’s essay appeared at the very beginning of the “slasher” cycle of movies in the late 1970s/early 1980s, and he stated that these movies appeal to a variety of urban legends:

Folklorists, in order to understand the psychology of response to these similar themes and motifs, would gain useful insights into meaning and function if their research nets were more broadly flung. We need to keep eyes and ears open for the appearance of the traditional horror story in film, television, and in print. (212)

The relationship between the “slasher” film of the late 1970s/early 1980s and urban legends is developed in greater detail in chapters 7 and 8.

Danielson (1979), like Thompson, noted that movies, like television or print media, are a major factor in legend transmission, as well as a reflection of it. But more important, Danielson noted that movies were *not* folkloric art, although a few dealt with folklore materials. On this latter point, Danielson cited the Japanese film *Kwaidan* (1964), a cinematic retelling of Japanese ghost stories (the American theatrical release has three stories; the international release available on DVD contains all four). He argued,

The movie is difficult to deal with in folklore classes because its highly refined film art is based on an equally refined literary treatment of Japanese legends in manuscript, which in turn are based on oral traditional narrative. . . . *Kwaidan* can confront students with the problems of defining text, of the transmission of traditional narrative in modern media, and of the drastic and subtle consequences of media shifts on folk narrative content. (210)

Implicit in Danielson’s argument is that such discussions as are raised by a film like *Kwaidan* are significant for (presumably folklore) students to engage with, yet he held back from presenting such an analysis himself.

Motif spotting can also be expressed in folkloristic bibliographies/filmographies, like that by Paul Smith and Sandy Hobbs (1990). Their annotated bibliography noted a variety of legend themes and motifs, described them, and then noted at least one film reference per citation. Given the overwhelming response to this document, the authors also wrote a column in 1992 in *FOAFtale News* that takes a specific legend and then annotates all its cinematic appearances.

Beyond specific folkloristic genres like myth, folktale, and legend, Tom Burns (1969) attempted to develop a methodology for identifying any expression of folklore in popular film and television texts. When an item of folklore is identified in the mass media, Burns proposed a rather rigid paradigm for distinguishing the item’s *validity* as folklore. Burns recognized that mass media uses a variety of folkloristic materials (“traditional music and song” [91–93], belief [93–97], gesture [97], narratives [97–99], proverbs [99–100], and custom [100–101]), but it was only when they had contextualized these items within a framework of ethnographic verisimilitude that they could be considered “true” folklore. From this point of view, a “true” folklore item consists of “(1) a traditional text (whether composed of verbal, nonverbal, or mixed components) or (2) a traditional performance of that text in (3) a traditional (customary) situation in

response to or in conjunction with (4) a traditional audience" (90). Other than specific films intended for a specific academic (folkloristic) audience (i.e., "ethnographic" or "folkloric" films), very few popular films could maintain this schema.

Contemporary Studies

Contemporary models are likewise challenging the idea that film texts are "fixed." Jackson (1989), albeit polemically, noted "the assumption seems to have been that since filmmaking is a highly technical occupation, one [that] results in a fixed text, the 'folk' don't have a chance to influence it." Jackson concluded, "The assumption isn't useful; neither is it valid" (388). With the DVD release of many "directors' cuts" and "restored versions," these "fixed" texts demonstrate a high degree of variation. In addition to these variants, different national and regional film (censorship) boards require different degrees of censorship and editing of films for public display, based on the community standards of the groups where they will exhibit the film. In the United States, for example, the Motion Picture Association of America is an internal form of censorship, even if industry imposed (rather than state imposed). If a studio wishes a film to receive a specific classification (i.e., an R-rated film instead of an NC-17 film or a film released without a classification—the difference is whether the cinema will permit even accompanied children to see the film), the studio will reedit the film. Many distribution companies refuse to handle "unrated" or NC-17 films for fear of community censure. They will distribute these cut-down, R-rated films domestically but not necessarily internationally. In 1986, I saw a horror movie, *The Re-Animator* (1985), in the United Kingdom. Great Britain has an external (that is, state imposed) film board (the British Board of Film Classification) that both classifies and censors films according to community standards. I subsequently reviewed the film on videocassette in North America. The film I saw theatrically in Britain was the unrated version (in the United Kingdom, the film received an "18 Certificate," which requires that one must be at least eighteen years of age to see it), whereas the North American video release was the R-rated version. The difference between the two versions is clearly noticeable with regard to the film's gore (the R-rated version being substantially less gory), but, furthermore, the humor in the film was based on these gory images, and therefore with the cut-back version they also lessened the humor of the film. This may seem like a minor point to make, but it demonstrates

that in fact these “fixed” texts do exist in multiple versions, and the context of the distribution of these quasi-variants needs further exploration.

In addition to these multiple versions of film narratives, as Jackson (1989) noted, we can tell narratives *about* films. I have already mentioned Sylvia Grider’s “media narraforms,” but beyond this coinage, Peter Narváez (1986) studied how changes in technology, like the availability of television, generate new folkloric forms, specifically narratives *about* technology.

Another example of this kind of film-oriented narration is worth noting, especially since it coincides with Hoffmann’s work on the pornographic film. Apparently, stories circulated in Hollywood during the filming of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) about the adult actors playing the Munchkins:

Because [*The Wizard of Oz* filmmakers] thought of them [Munchkin actors] as like children, the average-sized adults working on the picture could not think of sexual relations between them as anything other than “unnatural” and stories circulated about orgies among them at the Culver City Hotel. The Disney artists were capable of imagining similar kinds of sexual excess in the seven dwarfs. “Suddenly, near the end of the picture,” one of the animators later recalled, “the tension in the studio was too much. To relieve it, there was a spontaneous avalanche of pornographic drawings from all over the studio. Drawings of Snow White being gang raped by the dwarfs, and mass orgies among the dwarfs themselves. Even the old witch was involved. Some of the drawings were about comic sexual aberrations that Krafft-Ebing would never have dreamed of. The mania went on for about a week, and as suddenly as it started the whole thing stopped. It must have been a form of hysteria brought on by fatigue and the relentless schedule. As far as I know, Walt [Disney] never heard about it. (Forgacs 1992, 371)

Leo Rosten’s 1941 protoethnography of Hollywood’s movie colony is full of apocryphal and anecdotal examples of these kinds of media legends.⁷ To wit,

In far-off Bombay the magazine *Filmindia* (which regularly denounces Hollywood’s portrayals of India) gave exquisite and unforgettable testimony to the influence of Hollywood when one of the advertisements, for a picture made in India, proclaimed: “Brahmin Boy Loves Untouchable Girl!” As the Anzac warriors marched across Libya to attack the Italians at Bardia, they sang a chorus from Mervyn Le Roy’s *Wizard of Oz*. (Rosten 1970, 7–8)

These media legends, which are legends and stories *about* the media, need to be identified in mostly nonacademic sources, like Hollywood biographies and

fan-culture sources. One of the few academic sources to investigate these media legends is Charles Kelley's (1991) study of the urban legend that the ghost of a young boy who committed suicide can be seen in the movie *Three Men and a Baby* (1987). Jackson (1989) also recognized that technical sophistication was in no way "less folk" than more traditional methods of construction:

The complexity of an event or operation has nothing to do with the folkloric interest: absent nostalgia and sentimentality, a trip by stagecoach is inherently no more folksy than a trip in the Concorde, and bread kneaded by the hand is no more folksy than bread kneaded in a Cuisinart. The folkloric interest is determined by the relation of people to the technology, not the presence or absence of technical sophistication. (388)

Studies need to be done on the relationship between product and process to popular filmmaking within an industrial context (working on from McCarl 1974). Todd Gitlin's (1983) ethnographic study of the Hollywood television industry or Rosten's (1970) study of Hollywood movie colony are but two examples. Narváez (1992) also saw the popular culture industries as engendering their own forms of folklore.

Fandom and Audience Studies

An area that has been emerging as a major area of study for folkloristics within popular culture is the audience ethnography. Jackson (1989) noted that the "folklore of audiences" was an area needing to be examined. He subdivided this area into specific subjects: "the information the audience brings to the experience of a film, the social behaviors adopted while in the screening place, and the ways the contents of films enter general consciousness and style" (389). As far back as 1970 though, David Riesman noted,

In America, people do not attend to the media as isolated atoms, but as members of groups which select among the media and interpret their messages. . . . Similarly, people go to movies in groups—especially teenagers who make up such a large proportion of the audience—and formal and informal fan clubs are of course a way of organizing these groups. . . . People do not read in groups. (256)

Although Riesman was looking at how nonliterate cultures used mass media as a surrogate for oral culture, we may point to this article as the beginning of the kind of audience ethnographic studies that are becoming popular in folklore studies.

Peter Narváez (1992) noted that one of the interstices of folklore and popular culture was the “expressive use of communications media, mass produced goods, and mass-mediated texts in small group contexts” (20). Fan culture is just such a “small group context.” Narváez (1987) rejected the perception of the popular-culture fan as a passive “victim” of the mass media.

Fans engage in complex manipulations of mass mediated culture for purposes of status and communication. . . . There are those who display or present signs of favorite performers, and the simulated performances of those entertainers, out of emotional involvement and love, hoping to convert their peers to fandom or at least an appreciation of meaningful cultural events. In communicating and appreciating similar popular performances friendship networks and cultural scenes develop and are reinforced in multifarious domestic and public contexts. (38)

Fan culture is also emergent around specific popular-culture genres like supermarket tabloids (Bird 1992) and romance literature (Radway 1984) or even around specific mass-mediated texts like the television series *Star Trek* (Bacon-Smith 1992) or movies like *Gone with the Wind* (Taylor 1989). Elizabeth Bird (1996) summarized the interest fan culture has for folkloristics: “If audience members are seen as active in helping to shape the way popular culture is created, they become much more comparable with folk ‘audiences’” (345). Fandom continues to be one of the more popular areas of cultural studies and folklore research (see also Jenkins and Tulloch 1995; Lewis 1992; Tulloch 2000).

Working ultimately from Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) understanding that television, as medium, is “cool” (36), Henry Jenkins (1992) argued that television audiences must supply their own interpretations of the content and that these interpretative strategies are highly creative. Beyond this, however, Jenkins noted that enclaves of fans group together, and these fan groups emerge as distinct cultures. “Far from syncopathic, fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions” (23–24; cf. Koven 1997). Jenkins laid down a theoretical model of fan culture that later ethnographies should follow in interpreting fan cultures: he referred to television fans as “poachers”:⁸

Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness. Like other popular readers, fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry’s decisions. Fans must

beg with the networks to keep their favorite shows on the air, must lobby producers to provide desired plot developments or to protect the integrity of favorite characters. Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualize our celebration of strategies of popular resistance. (26–27)

Further folkloristic studies need to be done on this kind of poaching, for example, the influences of fan culture in popular cinema genres like the action or horror films—film genres that have huge fan bases. Often those fans become filmmakers themselves within those genres. Postmodern studies, which see a kind of bricolage in the creation of artistic texts, are needed to do archaeology on the influences on these films, even to the point of identifying potential oikotypes in film genre history.

Audiences also follow other forms of traditional and tradition-like behaviors. Walter Evans (1982) noted,

The adolescent who squirms and perspires his way through a good monster movie participates in an imaginative experience in many ways incredibly close to the complicated and detailed initiatory practices of premodern peoples around the world. Indeed, the complex initiatory pattern echoed in these films lends tremendous power and significance to their otherwise largely incomprehensible grab bag of formulaic motifs. (135)

Although I take issue with Evans's assertion of verisimilitude between traditional rites of passage and the images in monster movies, I do agree that horror movies *function* as initiation rites within our postindustrialist culture. We can see the action of going to a “scary movie” as ritualistic, as calendrical (at Halloween), or as a rite of passage. One similar study explored the ethnic *film festival* as site for emergent liminality (Koven 1999b), but more needs to be done in the area of the social dynamics of specific film genre attendance.

James McClenon and Emily Edwards (1995) offered another interesting use of film texts within a folklore context. Within the rubric of belief studies, the authors were trying to assess the belief tradition of incubus and succubus attacks. They argued that given the vast number of incubus-themed movies and noting those movies' demographics, incubus-related memorates should be available from those groups who go to the movies. No such memorates were collected from that group, thereby disproving the idea that exposure to incubus films sparked incubus attacks. What few incubus narratives were collected fell outside the films' demographics: those people who claim incubus experiences did not watch incubus movies. Movies, in this instance,

are expressions of cultural beliefs that experience has informed, not the other way around. What is fascinating about their findings was their unproblematic use of film to discuss culture. For McClenon and Edwards, film is the dominant medium for cultural transmission in contemporary Western culture (i.e., that which determines our Western worldview). But by studying the belief traditions as expressed in contemporary cinema, the authors discovered that the mass media do not inform belief traditions as much as they artistically communicate the belief traditions via the mass media, that is, *transmitted* through media like cinema.

Conclusion

According to Bruce Jackson (1989),

Film is the dominant narrative mode of our time. Film and television provide much of the sense of community in a mobile and electronic world: the verbal and imaginative referents we utilize in ordinary face-to-face encounters are as likely to come from our separate-but-shared media experience as anywhere else. Film and television are far too important to be left to the media studies and literature scholars. (389)

And yet, although certainly not *central* to folkloristic research, folklorists *have* explored certain aspects of popular film and television beyond the documentary cinema.

Studies that identify folkloric motifs and tale-types in popular (fiction) films and television have tended to dominate the research—whether from myth, folktale, legend, or other folkloric sources. Some of these studies suffice to *identify* the folklore within, while others look to analyze the changes to the story’s meanings when transferred/adapted/translated from one medium to another.

Next to the “motif-spotting” research, the most popular (or, rather, prolific) interstice between folkloristics and popular-culture studies is fan ethnography. Cultural studies have adopted ethnographic methodologies from the social sciences in recent years and have been producing substantive scholarship in this area, of which I have only touched the surface. Increasingly, film and cultural studies are becoming more interested in issues of audience from a more experiential perspective, as a counter to a perceived dominance of their fields from “ideal spectator” types of research.

Separated by a decade, both Paul Smith and Bruce Jackson bemoaned the absence of systematic analysis of popular film and television for the dis-

courses of folkloristics. While not *entirely* an accurate observation, and albeit less accurate for Smith than for Jackson (because the intervening decade produced a great deal of the material I have outlined here), folklore studies is *not* film studies, and, while relevant for folklorists to discuss, given the correct contexts, popular cinema remains tangential and an adjunct to the main tenets of folkloristics.

But, in order to develop any in-depth research in the convergence between folklore and film, closer consideration and problematization needs to be done on the methods and methodologies that such studies must be predicated on. I now wish to discuss such considerations of methodology.

Notes

1. It should be noted, though, that other folklorists and cultural scholars (see below) argued against this idea that the mass media homogenized culture (cf. Narváez and Laba 1984).

2. James Hodge (1988), for example, outlined his position that the structural opposition of binaries that underlie mythology (good/evil, solar/chthonic) was evident in contemporary science-fiction television shows and children's fantasy cartoons. Hodge left his remarks at the level of identifying that they, in fact, were present and did not attempt an analysis of meaning. Such approaches are consistent with the "motif spotters."

3. It is worth inserting here, even parenthetically, reference to some of the research film scholars have done drawing on shared interests with folklore, specifically regarding structural approaches to myth. Will Wright's (1978) structural study of the Western genre, *Sixguns and Society*, examined the popular cinema depicting the "Old West" in Lévi-Straussian terms, revealing the mythic underpinnings of that genre. And following on from Wright's study, Robert Baird (1998) likewise applied syntagmatic structuralism to the revisionist Western *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Other studies have attempted to do similar with Vietnam War films (Whillock 1990; Williams 1990). Proppian *morphological* studies have been carried out on films like *Fatal Attraction* (1987) (Hala 1992) and Hollywood cartoons (Leskosky 1989; see also Cawelti 1976). David Bordwell (1988) wrote a sustained criticism of Proppian film analysis as well.

4. A point that these debates seem to forget is that the Disney canon was not originally intended as "children's" entertainment. David Forgacs (1992) noted, "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1942), and *Bambi* (1942) were all designed as films for both young and old—clean, nonviolent, fantasies with songs and happy endings. They were not targeted at a 'family audience' in the modern sense of the term—adults accompanying children as the primary spectators—but over time they helped bring such an audience into being. *Fantasia* was something of an exception to this pattern, an odd hybrid of light entertainment,

a would-be cultural movie and an experiment for the Disney artists in abstract animation suggested by music. In terms of its reception, it had a strange reincarnation in the 1960s as a hippy film. Now it is being marketed as a children's/family film" (366–67).

5. Schechter (1988) also noted that the story "The Willful Child" contains little but this single motif.

6. Ironically, in 1991, when Disney brought out its version of *Beauty and the Beast*, it utilized many of the surreal *visual* motifs that Cocteau had introduced.

7. Rosten (1970) referred to his own work as "putting Hollywood under the microscopes of social science" (v), but today we would refer to his work as ethnography.

8. Jenkins (1992) acknowledged Michel de Certeau with the idea of "poaching": "fans become a model of the type of textual 'poaching' de Certeau associates with popular reading. Their activities pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media" (23).

PART TWO

THE SEARCH FOR A
METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER TWO



Based on Some Forgotten Lore: *The Wicker Man*, Frazer, and the Ancient Celts

In searching for a method for the study of folklore and film, one of the first logical approaches would be to look at those films that appear to be based on folklore—at least in terms that a general public would understand as folklore. *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) is a film of particular interest to folklorists: here is a film that foregrounds and makes explicit the relationship between horror cinema, particularly horror cinema about paganism and witchcraft, and its folkloric roots. The film's director, Robin Hardy, and its screenwriter, Anthony Shaffer, have made equally explicit their extensive research into Britain's pagan past in order to realize their film. But *The Wicker Man* is furthermore a central film in discussing the relationship between folklore and popular culture, specifically popular film: for the kinds of research that Hardy and Shaffer have done raises several significant problems in the relationship between these two media. It is these points of convergence that this chapter discusses.

The folklore discourse within *The Wicker Man* coalesces around the film's reconstruction of an imaginary Celtic pagan past that has been revived on a remote Scottish island by the fictional laird Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee). In this respect, the film attempts to diegetically revive an un-self-consciously Victorian perception of Celtic paganism. Specifically, the film's titular set piece, in which the film's protagonist Sergeant Neil Howie (Edward Woodward) is burned alive at the film's conclusion in a sacrifice to the goddess Nuada to ensure the island's agrarian prosperity, is based largely on the description of this rite in Sir James G. Frazer's (1963) 1922 revision of *The Golden Bough*.

But it is this interpretation of Frazer, of seeing *The Golden Bough* as a *historical* rather than a *folkloristic* description, that colors the entire film's folkloristic discourse—the film's “folkloristic fallacy” as I have termed it. This misinterpretation, in many respects, results in a confusion regarding the different genres of oral folklore: Hardy and Shaffer did not seem to recognize that the “Wicker Colossus” story, as it appears in Frazer and his own sources (namely, Julius Caesar's *The Gallic Wars*), is a legend told about one culture *by a different culture*. In this respect, as legend, the story that the ancient Celts burned people alive as sacrifices in these wicker colossi needs to be seen not as “literally” true but as legendary. Elliott Oring (1986) has noted,

Legends are considered narratives which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing. The narration of a legend is, in a sense, the negotiation of the truth of these episodes. This is not to say that legends are always held to be true, as some scholars have claimed, but that at the core of the legend is an evaluation of its truth status. . . . This diversity of opinion does not negate the status of the narrative as legend because, whatever the opinion, the truth status of the narrative is what is being negotiated. In a legend, the question of truth must be *entertained* even if that truth is ultimately rejected. Thus, the legend often depicts the improbable with the world of the possible. The legend never asks for the suspension of disbelief. It is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation; consequently, the art of legendry engages the listener's sense of the possible. (125)

To see the narrative of the wicker colossus of the ancient Celts, in particular their burning of human sacrifices within, as *legend* is to engage in a debate about whether people *really did* such a thing, but *by a culture other than the one portrayed in the episode*. That is, legends are, in addition to negotiations about the possible, negotiations about the other. To see the “wicker colossus” episode as legend, in part, is to see a negotiation of whether such “barbarity” could have been perpetuated by non-Christians/non-Romans (depending on the source of the legend), thereby creating a visceral distinction between “us” (Frazer's Victorian Britons or Caesar's Republican Romans) and “them” (the ancient pre-Christian Celts or cultures deserving to be conquered and occupied); the legend genre demands such questions be discussed, even if ultimately discounted. And had the makers of *The Wicker Man* engaged in such debate or presented the film's dénouement as a discursive episode, this current work would be rendered moot.

Unfortunately, in a series of interviews and documentaries surrounding *The Wicker Man*, both Hardy and Shaffer have made absolutely explicit the source materials that inspired the film: namely and primarily, *The Golden*

Bough. More significantly, however, both men, well read and erudite, appear to believe in the literal truth of Frazer's depiction. As Robin Hardy himself noted on the New Orleans television show *Critic's Choice* in 1978, he wanted to re-create "what a pagan society was like." This is a perspective that Hardy has maintained since the film was made over thirty years ago. However, that Frazer's work is used uncritically by Hardy and Shaffer becomes highly problematic in that they unintentionally reproduce many of the flaws of Frazer's original. This is not the place to go into tremendous detail about the problems in *The Golden Bough*, particularly for contemporary folklorists and anthropologists, but some context is required.

The word *folk-lore*, coined by the antiquarian collector William John Thoms in a letter published in the *Athenaeum* on August 22, 1846, as a replacement for the then used term *popular antiquities*, emerged as the scientific discourse of anthropology in the middle of the century. This brought folklore from a hobby of the amateur collector to an academic discourse, largely through two works by the so-called father of anthropology, E. B. Tylor: *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1878) and *Primitive Culture* (1873) (Dorson 1968, 187). In the former, as Richard Dorson (1968) summarized,

Folklore represented the contemporary superstitions and nursery tales of civilized peoples. Mythology preserved the explanation in story form, which all peoples, from the primitive to the highly developed, fashioned to account for their supernatural origins. Folklore belonged only to the last and highest stage of cultural progression and *embodied survivals from the earlier stages*. Mythology appeared at all stages, but in varying degrees of simplicity and sophistication according to the advancement of the race. (187, emphasis added)

Tylor took the then popular theories of biological evolution and applied them to cultural development, where cultures gradually *evolved* from states of primitive savagery to the highest levels of civilization. Tylor developed this idea of cultural survivals further in his *Primitive Culture*, wherein he identified still existent practices of superstition and forms of animism that had survived from the primitive past of a culture:

While the main march of mankind is upward, from savagery through barbarism to ascending levels of civilization, relics of savagery, such as witchcraft, still survive among civilized peoples, and occasionally burst into revivals, as in the fad of spiritualism, a revival of primitive sorcery. (Dorson 1968, 193)

It is this theory of survivals that directly inspired Cambridge don James Frazer in 1890 to publish, first in two volumes, *The Golden Bough*, which

traces the cultural development from animistic primitivism through to civilized religious practices as a massive, global, and significantly *generalized* study in religious survivals. Frazer was not immune to attacks by other scholars, including a number of folklorists who in 1878 formed The Folk-Lore Society (which has survived until the present). For example, Andrew Lang, while more or less supporting the Tylorian theory of survivals, attacked Frazer's scholarship, which he saw as "based on conjecture, false analogy, unwarranted surmise, and invalid reference" (Dorson 1968, 285). More pertinently, George Laurence Gomme criticized Frazer for his "free linkage of customs and rites from unlike cultures," and this is one of the major problems of Frazer for contemporary folklorists and anthropologists (Dorson 1968, 284). And, by their uncritical reading of Frazer, these criticisms carry over into Hardy and Shaffer's *The Wicker Man*, as I discuss later. Perhaps significantly, what the director and screenwriter demonstrate by their unquestioning acceptance of *The Golden Bough's* "truths" is Frazer's popularity beyond the scholarly arena, and, as Dorson (1968) noted, "a reading public indifferent to scholarly polemics relished the 'golden treasury of stories for grown-up children' and appreciated learning about *the less advanced peoples within the Empire*" (287, emphasis added). Also separated by nearly two generations, Hardy and Shaffer are just such a reading public for *The Golden Bough*, and their "indifference" toward the academic dimension of the work shows up in the film.

Just as popular film is of peripheral interest for the majority of contemporary folklorists, so too is anthropological verisimilitude of secondary importance to makers of horror films. Instead of re-creating a modern survival of Britain's pagan past, Hardy and Shaffer (working clearly within the context of Frazer's popular reading audience) instead reproduce a late Victorian reconstruction of what such a past might have been like, complete with the ideology of the empire. Although, perhaps parenthetically, it *could* be argued that the diegetic society Hardy and Shaffer create is intentionally a Victorian reconstruction rather than any attempt at an authentic and historically accurate depiction of Britain's pagan past, as we are told that the first Lord Summerisle reestablished the "old gods" in 1868, and so not only *might* he have been familiar with Tylor's *Early History of Mankind*, but he certainly would have been aware of the discussion of cultural survivals that was part of the intellectual zeitgeist (Hardy and Shaffer 2000, 132). So in some respects, the Paganism practiced on Summerisle can be seen to be a direct result of this (fictional) mid-Victorian revival. However, Robin Hardy himself undermined such a theory in interviews wherein he asserted the accuracy of this depiction of Celtic paganism rather than the accuracy of it as Victorian reconstruction.¹

Hardy and Shaffer dipped liberally into *The Golden Bough* in order to create their world of Summerisle, but this “dipping” was highly selective: Frazer’s chapter “The Fire-Festivals of Europe,” wherein he notes the pan-European (if not universal) significance of certain bonfire rites, and his lengthy discussion of the Scottish Beltane festival (celebrated on the first of May) make up much of the context for *The Wicker Man*’s diegesis. Frazer himself included a chapter-length survey outlining the variety of interpretive contexts, largely anthropological in scope, for discussing such fire festivals, although Hardy and Shaffer seem not to have recognized the diversity of interpretive perspectives that the chapter depicts. At least in this chapter, Frazer (1963) avoids the superficial trap of bestowing a single interpretation on the fire festivals of Europe but demonstrates a contemporary weighing up of Mannhardt’s solar theory, which argues that the lighting of enormous bonfires is a kind of mimicking of the sun’s regenerative powers. This is contrasted with purification theory, which sees these bonfires as a means of purifying the land of harmful influences or evil spirits. Significantly, not only did Frazer tend to agree with this latter interpretation, noting that it “appears more probable and more in accordance with the evidence than the opposing theory of their connexion [sic] with the sun” (753), but the purification theory is ethnographically verified. As the author noted, “It is to be observed that the people who practice the fire-customs appear never to allege the solar theory in explanation of them, while on the contrary they do frequently and emphatically put forward the purificatory theory” (751). While throughout much of *The Golden Bough* Frazer did tend toward a symbolic interpretation along Mannhardtian lines, on the meaning of fire festivals at least, Frazer opts for the simpler explanation of purification ritual.² In many respects, *The Wicker Man* owes more to the solar theories of Wilhelm Mannhardt than James G. Frazer, but it is through Frazer that Hardy and Shaffer received their information.

The relationship between *The Golden Bough* and *The Wicker Man*, however, is absolutely explicit in the depiction of the (film’s) titular construction. In Frazer’s chapter “The Burning of Human Beings in the Fires,” the author noted that the fire festivals were survivals of pagan-past rites of human sacrifice, specifically during the Scottish Beltane festival. This section of Frazer (1963) is significant enough to quote at length:

Of human sacrifices offered on these occasions the most unequivocal traces, as we have seen, are those which, about a hundred years ago, still lingered at the Beltane fires in the Highlands of Scotland, that is, among a Celtic people who, situated in a remote corner of Europe and almost completely isolated

from foreign influence, had till then conserved their old heathenism better perhaps than any other people in the West of Europe. It is significant, therefore, that human sacrifices by fire are known, on unquestionable evidence, to have been systematically practiced by the Celts. The earliest description of these sacrifices has been bequeathed to us by Julius Caesar.³ As conqueror of the hitherto independent Celts of Gaul, Caesar had ample opportunity of observing the national Celtic religion and manners, while these were still fresh and crisp from the native mind and had not yet been fused in the melting-pot of Roman civilization. With his own notes Caesar appears to have incorporated the observations of a Greek explorer, by name Posidonius, who traveled in Gaul about fifty years before Caesar carried the Roman arms to the English Channel. The Greek geographer Strabo and the historian Diodorus seem also to have derived their descriptions of the Celtic sacrifices from the work of Posidonius, but independently of each other, and of Caesar, for each of the three derivative accounts contain some details which are not to be found in either of the others. By combining them, therefore, we can restore the original account of Posidonius with some probability, and thus obtain a picture of the sacrifices offered by the Celts of Gaul at the close of the second century before our era. The following seem to have been the main outlines of the custom. Condemned criminals were reserved by the Celts in order to be sacrificed to the gods at a great festival which took place once in every five years. The more there were of such victims, the greater was believed to be the fertility of the land. If there were not enough criminals to furnish victims, captives taken in war were immolated to supply the deficiency. When the time came the victims were sacrificed by the Druids or priests. Some they shot down with arrows, some they impaled, and some they burned alive in the following manner. Colossal images of wicker-work or of wood and grass were constructed; these were filled with live men, cattle, and animals of other kinds; fire was then applied to the images, and they were burned with their living contents. (757–58)

In setting *The Wicker Man* on a remote Scottish island, Hardy and Shaffer were clearly informed by Frazer's assertion that the "old heathenism" was, until recently, still in evidence in the remotest parts of the country. Where Hardy and Shaffer diverged from Frazer's account is in the nature of the sacrifice. *The Golden Bough* makes explicit that those sacrificed were criminals or prisoners of war, not innocents like Howie, an aspect also noted by Caesar.⁴

As I noted, contrary to Mannhardt's solar theory of ritual, the killing and burning of criminals and captured enemies was, for Frazer, more likely a purification ritual. Although Frazer was more inclined toward a Mannhardt-inspired interpretation of this ritual in an early edition of *The Golden Bough*, he revised his opinion in later editions. As Frazer (1963) noted,

The Druidical sacrifices which we are considering were explained in a different way by W. Mannhardt. He supposed that the men whom the Druids burned in wicker-work images represented the spirits of vegetation, and accordingly that the custom of burning them was a magical ceremony intended to secure the necessary sunshine for the crops. Similarly, he seems to have inclined to the view that the animals which used to be burnt in the bonfires represented the cornspirit, which, as we saw in an earlier part of this work, is often supposed to assume the shape of an animal. This theory is no doubt tenable, and the great authority of W. Mannhardt entitles it to careful consideration. I adopted it in former editions of this book; but on reconsideration it seems to me on the whole to be less probable than the theory that the men and animals burnt in the fires perished in the character of witches. This latter view is strongly supported by the testimony of the people who celebrate the fire-festivals, since a popular name for the custom of kindling the fires is "burning the witches," effigies of witches are sometimes consumed in the flames, and the fires, their embers, or their ashes are supposed to furnish protection against witchcraft. On the other hand there is little to show that the effigies or the animals burnt in the fires are regarded by the people as representatives of the vegetation-spirit, and that the bonfires are sun-charms. (762–63)

Therefore, as Frazer himself observed, despite an earlier predilection toward solar theories to explain the rites of the ancient Celts, a more considered argument was toward a purificatory interpretation of the rite. Again, as Frazer (1963) noted,

If we are right in interpreting the modern European fire-festivals as attempts to break the power of witchcraft by burning or banning the witches and warlocks, it seems to follow that we must explain the human sacrifices of the Celts in the same manner; that is, we must suppose that the men whom the Druids burnt in wicker-work images were condemned to death on the ground that they were witches or wizards, and that the mode of execution by fire was chosen because burning alive is deemed the surest mode of getting rid of these noxious and dangerous beings. (761)

For the residents of Summerisle to burn the innocent Howie as a sacrifice in order to appease Nuada (the ancient Celtic sun goddess) and bring prosperity back to the island's apple crop is working from a Mannhardtian solar theory perspective. By Frazer's own admission, *The Golden Bough* originally privileged this perspective, but in later editions it was displaced by a more considered and ethnographically verifiable purification theory. What becomes clear, however, in looking at Hardy and Shaffer's source materials in the creation of *The Wicker Man* is a demonstration of the absolute literal

mindfulness of the diegesis' creators. They read Frazer, and an early edition of Frazer at that, and interpreted his depictions to be accurate, not discursive, as later editions of *The Golden Bough* did. For the filmmakers, their project, using Frazer, was an accurate recreation of Celtic rites. In so doing, they missed Frazer's own admission that such a depiction was being filtered through very specific theoretical schemata, namely, Mannhardt's solar theory.

This literal realization of Frazer occurs throughout the film: as another example, at one point during his discussion of the burning of wicker-work effigies, Frazer noted that a false victim was sometimes chosen and that much play was made of that person being about to be thrown into the flames. As Frazer (1963) also noted, "The *pretend* victim was seized and a show made of throwing him into the flames, and for some time afterwards people affected to speak of him as dead" (756, emphasis added). The entire sense of play in *The Wicker Man's* narrative can be seen as a dramatization of this rite. Lord Summerisle's deception of Howie, specifically his use of Rowan as bait to get the gormless lawman to the island, creates Rowan as such a false victim. While at first Howie can find no reference to Rowan ever having been alive, it quickly becomes apparent, to Howie at least, that she is dead. (The audience is equally denied any contrary information, so at this stage in the narrative development, we too believe Rowan is dead.) That Rowan's death has been a ruse to trap the innocent Howie becomes apparent only at the film's dénouement. Hardy and Shaffer also throw in a miscellany of "olde" motifs, some from Frazer, some from elsewhere, to realize their film. For example, Howie is put to sleep with the "Hand of Glory," a dead woman's hand burned as a candle that induces a deep sleep: this also appears in Frazer's discussion of homeopathic magic (35). This magical belief is not linked to the Beltane festival or pagan human sacrifice rites, but it is there in the filmic mix. Frazer also discussed the use of virgins, like Howie, in human sacrifice, although these rites are explicitly (and significantly) non-European. Elsewhere in the film we can see other forms of contagious and imitative magic rites being performed, like the small frog May Morrison puts into Myrtle's mouth to transfer her daughter's sore throat to the amphibian or the animistic costumes worn in the May Day procession, including the Hobby-Horse. These "bits" of action and mise-en-scène are intended to evoke a feeling of authenticity within the diegesis, but instead, because of their original disparate temporal and spatial contexts, the effect is one of a folkloric amusement park.

Allan Brown (2000) noted that in the creation of Sergeant Howie, "Shaffer and Hardy's perfect sacrifice would be a checklist, would contain *all* the attributes which had made one a perfect sacrifice. Shaffer and Hardy's victim

would be a willing, king-like virgin fool” (23). From a folkloric perspective, the problem here (and elsewhere within the film) is that the idea of a “check-list” of attributes is a literary contrivance and unlikely to be found in practice beyond the fact that, as I noted previously, the victims in the wicker colossus would probably have been criminals or witches or both and their burning would have purged evil influences from the society (Frazer 1963, 757). This demonstrates, quite explicitly, that often when popular culture forms *do* folklore, they use all of it, every bit they can get their hands on, regardless of original context, so that the results are often an undifferentiated quagmire that does little to explore the people being represented. Instead, it unproblematically reproduces the ideology of the film’s creators.

Hardy and Shaffer’s folkloristic fallacy, however, goes deeper still: the filmmakers are solely dependent on (and uncritical of) a single source for their material. Perhaps it is a bit too grand to expect verisimilitude of anthropological discourse in a low-budget horror/fantasy film, but what emerges from *The Wicker Man* is also a demonstration of the academic problems within Frazer. In discussing the meaning inherent within the fire festivals across Europe, Frazer (1963) noted that “we can hardly help being struck by the resemblance which the [European fire festival] ceremonies bear to each other, at whatever time of the year and in whatever part of Europe they are celebrated” (743). Victorian anthropology and folklore studies tended to conceive the world in grand master narratives; based on surface comparisons, world cultures were seen to celebrate more or less the same calendrical and life cycle ceremonies; any differences were seen as unimportant cultural deviances. These ideas were later popularized by Joseph Campbell, after World War II, as the monomyth, his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1988)—that all cultures shared the same myths, just in different guises.

This approach, while superficially appearing to be egalitarian, is in actuality purely colonial: only from a point of cultural hegemony can one hold one’s culture up as a template for other cultures and say that they are more or less the same. The more ethnographic studies, beginning with Malinowski for British anthropology and Boas for American anthropology, particularly after World War II, tended to embrace a more insider-oriented, experiential dimension to cultural practices. In other words, what Hardy and Shaffer attempted to do in *The Wicker Man* was unproblematically literalize a colonialist agenda that sees the Celtic nations as an undifferentiated whole and does not distinguish between the other cultural influences that may have affected Frazer’s descriptions of the Beltane and sacrificial rites. And this is without questioning Frazer’s unproblematic acceptance of the classical source material he cites freely—specifically Caesar, who had

his own agenda in seeing the Celts demonized as human-sacrificing savages. This depiction of the “savage Celts” was further disseminated by Aylett Sammes, whose famous 1676 illustration of Caesar’s “wicker man” colossus was given to *The Wicker Man*’s art director, Seamus Flannery, by Hardy to follow in the creation of the film’s wicker colossus. So in many respects, what we see in the film is a complex trajectory of influences: Caesar, working from reports by Posidonius and others, depicts the idea of the “wicker man” as a Celtic sacrificial rite. This becomes graphically depicted in a seventeenth-century version of *The Gallic Wars*, and the idea is again picked up by Frazer, who attempts to understand its meaning. Those discussions find their way to Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer, who create their screenplay and realize this Frazerian world in the guise of Summerisle, and this is further complicated by having Flannery base the art direction on Sammes’s illustration. But then the bizarre really takes off: *The Wicker Man*, as a cult film, in turn influences at least two generations of some modern pagans who, in attending the annual Wickerman Festival in Scotland and Burning Man Festival in Nevada, attempt to re-create the Celtic culture of Summerisle.⁵ Although these participants recognize that *The Wicker Man* is a fictional film, they do not necessarily question Hardy and Shaffer’s source materials, particularly Frazer. But, in their living re-creation of Summerisle, they have, in fact, made Summerisle and its (neo-)/(pseudo-) Celtic rites real in what in legend studies is known as ostension (see chapters 9 and 10).

While Robin Hardy, Anthony Shaffer, and any other number of people associated with *The Wicker Man* may feel that the film is rooted within some kind of “authentic folklore” because of the filmmakers’ use of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and that its literal realization within the film is, in effect, an accurate realization of ancient Celtic rites, they are working under what I have termed the “folklore fallacy.” Notwithstanding any flaws within Frazer’s approach, ideological issues inherent within Victorian anthropology and folklore studies, or other methodological problems, it is the indiscriminate inclusion of any and all forms of “folklore” into the film’s diegetic mix that creates this fallacy. Perhaps unintentionally, however, the film does operate within a significant folkloristic nexus: if we see *The Wicker Man* as but one text in a long line of cultural representations regarding Celtic/Druidic rites—from Caesar through Sammes and then Frazer to Hardy and Shaffer—and divorce the discourse from any consideration of “authenticity,” we can identify the distinct thread of the legend of the “Wicker Man.”

Notes

1. For example, see the commentary track on the 2001 Warner Home Video DVD release of the director's cut of *The Wicker Man* as well as David Gregory's 2001 documentary *The Wicker Man Enigma*, also on the same DVD set. See also Abbott and Leven's 2001 documentary *Burnt Offering: The Cult of the Wicker Man*, originally broadcast on Channel Four in the United Kingdom.

2. Alfred Nutt, another contemporary of Frazer's, praised *The Golden Bough* specifically for the author's use of Mannhardt. Nutt wrote, "Their names will remain indissolubly linked together in the history of folklore scholarship" (quoted in Dorson 1968, 284). What Nutt appreciated was the linking of custom with storytelling, song, and riddle, from the evolutionary/survival perspective, rather than the so-called diffusionist position, which stated that narrative, song, riddle, and so on disseminated out from and traveled largely independently of custom and ritual (Dorson 1968, 284).

3. In Caesar's account, the general noted that "the nation of all the Gauls is extremely devoted to superstitious rites; and on that account they who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and employ the Druids as the performers of those sacrifices; because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods can not be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind ordained for national purposes. Others have figures of vast size, the limbs of which formed of osiers they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the men perish enveloped in the flames. They consider that the oblation of such as have been taken in theft, or in robbery, or any other offence, is more acceptable to the immortal gods; but when a supply of that class is wanting, they have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent" (Caesar, n.d., VI.16).

4. Caesar (n.d., VI.16), although Caesar did note that "when a supply of that class [criminals] is [found] wanting, they have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent" (VI.16).

5. It does, however, need to be noted that not all modern pagans are under the impression that *The Wicker Man* or *The Golden Bough* are either ethnographic or accurate in their depictions of Celtic rites or witchcraft. And neither do all modern pagans attend these festivals.

CHAPTER THREE



Searching for Tale-Types and Motifs in the Zombie Film

Particularly within the horror film, folklore appears to be everywhere on the screen. Traditional cultures are often full of monsters and demons of many varieties. With its focus on “peasant superstition,” ancient monsters, and antiquarian belief traditions, one would normally expect the modern zombie movie to be full of such lore; however, closer examination of both the folklore itself and several zombie-oriented films reveals a much different phenomenon, one that not only sheds light on the folklore themes and motifs within zombie films but also challenges and problematizes many of the methodologies drawn on in studying the intersections of folklore and popular film. The methodologies employed here are twofold, reflecting two different aspects of folklore study: on the one hand is a “literary” approach, looking to the folklore collections, with their largely Euro–North American bias, to ascertain the degree to which zombie cinema has drawn on traditional folklore motifs and narrative types; the other approach is more ethnographic, exploring the anthropological literature in an attempt to ascertain the zombie film’s verisimilitude with the living Haitian belief traditions. Neither approach is wholly successful and requires a degree of interpretation not to try to make the paradigms fit the films but instead to see the dialogue the folklore has with these perennially popular horror films. This chapter is an attempt to explore the folklore motifs within the zombie film; however, like most anthropological explorations into the realm of the zombie, the conclusions are slightly different than what is expected.

As I have already demonstrated, the study of the intersection between folklore and popular film is not nearly as clear-cut as would be immediately expected if one were merely looking to see visual adaptations of traditional “lore.” Leslie Jones (1996), in referring to *The X-Files*’s use of folklore, referred to most popular representations of traditional narrative as being “notionally folkloric” (79); that is, popular film and television writers tend to grab any snippet of lore, without due attention to cultural context or meaning, resulting in invented cultural narratives that are more “Frankenstein-like” monsters, cobbled together from any handy source, than a representation of the narrative traditions these stories emerged from (I discuss this further in chapter 5). However, such cobbling does not necessarily negate these films’ use of folklore; Julia George (1982) surveyed eleven horror films that she happened to catch on television and, in a close textual study of four, identified very specific folktale motifs within them. None of these films made direct reference to specific folktale or legend narratives; that is, they were not explicitly *adaptations* of popular lore, but in telling their *filmic* narratives, they drew on folklore as texture.

Between a Type and a Motif

Within folkloristics, the academic study of folklore, studies of traditional narratives distinguish between the tale-*type* and *motif*. Stith Thompson (1977) defined the tale-type as

a traditional tale that has an independent existence. It may be told as a complete narrative and does not depend for its meaning on any other tale. It may indeed happen to be told with another tale, but the fact that it may appear alone attests its independence. It may consist of only one motif or of many. Most animal tales and jokes and anecdotes are types of one motif. The ordinary *Märchen* (tales like Cinderella or Snow White) are types consisting of many of them. (415)

Beginning early in the twentieth century, the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne began codifying these tale-types into an index; and the project was completed and revised by Thompson.¹ The resulting index, *The Types of the Folktale*, listed all known independent tale-types, arranged them according to a specific cataloging procedure (akin to the Dewey Decimal System in library science), gave a brief synopsis of each tale, and noted the specific literary references to these tales from the known folktale collections and archives. For example (and one that will be relevant in this chapter), AT 363² is “The Vampire,” and the synopsis given was as follows: “The bridegroom eats corpses in three churches (E251.3.1, G20).³ He appears to his bride in the

form of her father, her mother, etc. (D40, D610) and when she tells about his habit he devours her” (Aarne 1981, 126). Aarne and Thompson then listed various collections in which this story can be found, and in this case, “The Vampire” narrative AT 363 can be found in Finnish, Swedish, Estonian, Livonian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Danish, Irish, Catalan, Italian, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Polish, Russian, and Turkish folktale collections (Aarne 1981, 126–27). As can be gleaned from just this single example, with perhaps the exception of the Catalan and Italian examples, this particular narrative can be found across most of northern Europe and down eastern Europe into the Balkans; a distinct map forms speculating how this particular tale-type has spread. “The Vampire” narrative is a fairly simple one, and despite not being explicitly about zombies (or at least zombies in horror cinema), what this story does have are the echoes that can be found in these movies, namely, a recognizably human (if not familiar) figure that devours the living.

A related and more complex folktale type is AT 307, “The Princess in the Shroud,” which is defined broadly as “Each morning the watchers are found dead. A youth overcomes the enchantment; the dead girl comes out of the shroud. He wins her hand. (Not always a princess)” (Aarne 1981, 99). Here the folktale is identified as including three distinct movements:

- I. *The Parents’ Hasty Wish*. (a) Barren parents wish for a child even if she is a devil. (b) A daughter is born who is diabolical.
- II. *Vampire*. After her death, she leaves the grave in the church at night like a vampire and kills the soldiers who keep watch.
- III. *Disenchantment*. At last she is disenchanting by a youth, on the advice of an old man, when for three nights in prayer, once kneeling before the altar, once prone before the altar, and once lying in her grave, he endures her punishments. The other watchers are resuscitated. Happy marriage. (Aarne 1981, 99–100)

It is this inclusion of an alternative (to AT 363) vampire narrative that is of particular interest in trying to identify traditional narrative types within the zombie film, for AT 307 and 363 are the only tale-type references to the kinds of resurrected monsters that are even vaguely similar to the kinds of cinematic monsters I am concerned with in this chapter.

More fruitful—but still not entirely successful—is an exploration of folktale *motifs* rather than full tale-types. Thompson (1977) defines the folktale motif as

the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition. In order to have this power it must have something unusual and striking about it. Most

motifs fall into three classes. First are the actors in a tale—gods, or unusual animals, or marvelous creatures like witches, ogres, or fairies, or even conventionalized human characters like the favorite youngest child or the cruel stepmother. Second comes certain items in the background of the action—magical objects, unusual customs, strange beliefs, and the like. In the third place there are single incidents. (415–16)

Published between 1955 and 1958 in six volumes, Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* classifies and catalogs the known folk narrative motifs. Volume 6 itself is an index to the *Index*; however, when searching for similar motif references between zombie movies and the oral narrative tradition, one needs to be highly flexible. There are no specific references to “zombie,” “voodoo,” or any of the stereotypical references we would expect from horror films. Instead, one needs to think more laterally and look to motifs pertaining to “Cannibal(s)(ism),” “Corpse,” “Body,” “Ghost,” and “The Dead.” Needless to say, most of the references under these indexical headings would not be relevant to a study such as this; that is, “Cutting toenails of c[annibal] woman G519.1.2” is not something I have come across in any horror film.⁴ However, one can also find, in this case under “Corpse,” “ghosts (eat c[orpse]) E256,” which is much closer to the kinds of motifs horror fans would be familiar with from zombie movies. These examples, although random, are further examples of what Thompson referred to as the second category of motifs, those that depict some kind of background action or “unusual custom.”

The Dead

Within the various volumes of Thompson's *Motif-Index*, two specific categories of folktale motifs hold possibilities for identifying traditional motifs within the modern zombie film: category E, “The Dead,” and category G, “Ogres.” To take each in turn, category E, “The Dead” features a number of significant motifs that should be largely familiar to fans of the zombie movie. Little in the first section of category E, “Resuscitation” (E0–E199), is seemingly relevant to this study, focusing more on those motifs wherein a character, like Snow White, is thought to be dead but is resuscitated and lives “happily ever after” or those more religious in tone, featuring the resurrection of the dead “Lazarus” style by Christ or various saints and other holy people. We do, however, find within this section motif E121.6.1,⁵ “Resuscitation by Demon's Entering Corpse” (Thompson 1955–1958, II.415), and

depending on the context of this motif's use, it could be either a motif pertaining to background action or a single incident. The notes that accompany this citation in Thompson refer to this motif as emerging from Irish mythology and, because of the two subsections attached, indicate that this is not a widely circulated or well-known motif within the oral tradition. However, within the horror film, demons may prefer to possess the living; they can also possess and thereby reanimate the dead, a belief tradition that can also be found among certain native groups in Indonesia (cf. Metcalf 1989). That this belief tradition is cited by Thompson as being of Irish rather than Indonesian origin calls attention to one of the central methodological flaws in Thompson's *Index*; the *Index* is clearly Eurocentrically biased, and this perhaps explains the absence of more "traditional" zombie lore within the folktale corpus, as there is little representation outside of Europe and European North America.

Much of category E, however, focuses on those motifs pertaining to ghosts and revenants, and despite the more ethereal nature of these monsters, in comparison to the more corporeal and visceral zombie of the movies (which I discuss more later), certain motifs are relevant here. The 200s of category E are concerned specifically with the "malevolent return from the dead" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.419–29), a motif that tends to parallel the zombie film; Romero's living dead, for example, are nothing if not malevolent. This section features the "return of family members" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.419–21) and motifs wherein "ghosts return to right wrongs" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.412–24), motifs that appear less relevant to exploring the folkloristic motifs within zombie films. E250 to E259.2 are concerned with "bloodthirsty revenants" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.424–25), and here we begin to see the motifs horror fans are more likely to be familiar with. It is within this section that the vampire lives, for example, as E251—and cross-referenced with AT tale-types 301 and 363, as I noted previously, a motif that describes a central character or agency within the folktale. More specifically, E251.3.1 tells us that "vampires eat corpses" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.425), a tradition from India, and, related, that "ghosts eat corpses" too (E256) (Thompson 1955–1958, II.425), a tradition that comes from Africa.⁶ These motifs further demonstrate how a single motif might describe initially a character or agency within the narrative (ghost or vampire) but can then extend to descriptions of actions themselves (the eating of the corpses). Motif E259 becomes a miscellaneous reference for other random motifs pertaining to these "bloodthirsty revenants" but includes (from India again) E259.1, "Corpse Bites Off Woman's Nose" (Thompson 1955–1958, II.425), an image that, if it has yet to occur in a zombie film, needs to be.

Elsewhere within category E is motif E267, “Dead Tears Living to Pieces” (Thompson 1955–1958, II.427), which Thompson identifies as British, occurring within the ballad tradition noted by Lowry Wimberly (1928). Significantly, what should be the most relevant motif in Thompson’s *Index* is one of the tougher to follow up. E422 is identified as “The Living Corpse” and is defined by Thompson as “Revenant is not a specter but has the attributes of a living person. He wanders around till his ‘second death,’ complete disintegration in the grave” (Thompson 1955–1958, II.445). This motif in particular both describes the character/agency (“The Living Corpse”) and develops the character slightly by motivating the figure’s existence (waiting until the monster’s “second death”). This creature is more in keeping with the cinematic zombie.

The problem is that the cinematic zombie is not a revenant, specter, or ghost; they are not ethereal embodiments of evil souls (or souls turned evil) who feast on the blood of the living. Although parenthetical to this study of the zombie, filing the vampire within this category recognizes the ethereal nature of that monster by aligning it with other “spirit” forms like ghosts. Yet, as I have demonstrated, many of the motifs of the zombie film echo more traditional motifs within “ghostlore,” including the lore of the vampire. Elsewhere, Thompson saw E422, “The Living Corpse” (zombie by any other name, at least within the cinematic tradition), as being an extension of the ghost motif. Thompson (1977) noted that “the ghost is little more than a living dead man in full flesh and blood pacing up and down the earth awaiting the second death when his body shall eventually disintegrate in the grave. Frightful creatures these are, often appearing as vampires living on the wholesome blood of mortals” (254). A few pages on, Thompson noted that “these revenants of flesh and blood are most often malicious, and their return is usually to punish rather than to reward [the living]” (256). What differentiates Thompson’s revenant tradition from the cinematic zombie tradition is the specificity of the return of the living dead; within the oral tradition, the dead come back for a specific purpose (malicious or benevolent) rather than the seemingly random return of the cinematic zombie, at least in the post-Romero films. That being said, it could be argued that the modern cinematic zombie film has a more sociological purpose behind it: that the dead have come back to life as some kind of unspoken punishment of the living, some punishment for the sins of modernity. “When there is no more room in Hell, the dead shall wander the Earth,” as the tagline for Romero’s 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead* put it.

This “living corpse” tradition of the reanimated dead body has a stronger tradition within the British and northern European ballad tradition, although Lowry Wimberly, like Thompson after him, contextualized this within the ghost tradition. Wimberly (1928) noted “that the ballad revenant is a living

corpse . . . for not only does our ghost share in the attributes of the dead and reflect its condition, but appears in certain instances to be identical with it” (234). Wimberly quoted from a Danish ballad the following stanza, which could equally have come from any zombie film: “Out from their chest she stretch’d her bones, / And rent her way through earth and stones” (234). Here, the ghostly revenant of the ballad text is the reanimated body of the dead mother, literally coming through the earth of her grave site. This “materiality” of the revenant, as Wimberly referred to it, even goes so far as to reflect the “incident of the dead man’s returning without his arms, which, he says, have rotted off, [and] may be explained by saying that the ghost simply reflects the condition of the dead body” (235–36). Clearly the ballad ghost is differentiated from the spectral light or sheet-wearing variety. And, as Wimberly again noted, “such an expression ‘living’ or ‘vitalized corpse’ is much to be preferred” (238).⁷

Within Norse mythology, of course, is the story of the Viking warriors who kill each other in the day but are revitalized at night to return and kill each other all over again the next day (Thompson 1977). But beyond that, as Jacqueline Simpson (1975) noted, within the Icelandic legend traditions, revenants also can take more corporeal forms, although the Icelandic *sending*, literally referring to the act of giving a gift or present, within the context of stories about sorcery, “always refers to a malignant ghost raised by conjuring a corpse from its grave (or at least by using a bone or other material object), and sent to destroy an enemy” (93). Despite Simpson’s identification of these Icelandic legends using Thompson’s motif E422, our “Living Corpse” motif, these stories consist of more spectral revenants being sent (via witchcraft) than the reanimation of dead bodies (Simpson 1975, 115). In an earlier book, Simpson did give, in great detail, the process by which an Icelandic sorcerer can raise a *sending*, and in this case, rather than a spectral presence, the sending is the reanimated corpse (Simpson 1972). As the *sending* emerges from the grave, Simpson warned, the wizard must be extremely careful to ensure that the revenant stays under the sorcerer’s control. But it is worth including a visual image Simpson did in her description of the raising of a *sending* that, again, zombie filmmakers should take note of:

When the dead first emerge from their graves, their mouths and nostrils are all bubbling with a frothy mixture of mucus and mud known as “corpse-froth”; this the wizard licks off with his tongue. Then he must draw blood from under the little toe of his right foot, and moisten the ghost’s tongue with it. (150)

Returning momentarily to the problematic nature of popular filmmakers ransacking folklore (poorly) and not doing proper folkloristic research into the

narrative traditions means that concepts like “corpse-froth” do not get included in zombie films. Often filmmakers doing proper folklore research into the themes of their films not only ensures accuracy and verisimilitude with narrative traditions but also reveals some really wonderfully repulsive images that are much better than most horror script and story writers can conjure themselves. The folk have been grossing each other out for centuries.

Parenthetically—and not within category E itself but perhaps vaguely relevant to the zombie film—motif F129.4.4⁸ is “Voyage to the Isle of the Dead,” in which Thompson noted that “visitors who sleep there die” (Thompson 1955–1958, III.21). Thompson further noted that again this motif is Irish in origin and is closely linked with more classical voyages to the underworld. But, perhaps with not too much of a stretch of the imagination, one could apply this motif to Lucio Fulci’s *Zombie* (1979), wherein the zombies are created on such an “Isle of the Dead” and every one of the human visitors stranded on the island (i.e., who end up sleeping there) dies.

Ogres

Thompson’s category G concerns “Ogres,” and within this category, the first 400 motif numbers are concerned with the many different kinds of ogres. And it is in category G where we find closer analogies with the cinematic zombie.

Under the broad category of “Ogre” in Thompson’s *Index* are specific references to cannibalism. Thompson distinguished between those cases of “regular cannibalism” (G10–G49), including G20, “Ghouls,” who are defined as “persons who eat corpses” (Thompson 1955–1958, III.278–79), and “occasionally cannibalism,” wherein often the cannibalism is either from extreme conditions (i.e., facing starvation) or accidental.

Sometimes the ogres are cannibals (motif E312), as in the story of Hansel and Gretel. However, one specific form of anthropophagus ogre Thompson noted with its own motif number, E312.1, is worth noting in slightly more detail: the “Pisaca. Drinks blood and eats human flesh. Eats corpses and makes living waste away” (Thompson 1955–1958, III.348). The Pisaca appears to share many commonalities with the cinematic zombie, yet Thompson notes that it is a monster from Hindu mythology, and I would suggest it highly unlikely that similarities are intentional.

Within folktales, ogres often take the narrative form of witches, trolls, or otherwise corporeal beings, including the devil. Despite referring to the “*huldre-folk*” Ol’ Lanky Tor meets on his journeys as “trolls” rather than “ogres,”

Reidar Christiansen (1964) refers to the story “Trolls Resent a Disturbance” as containing motif G312, the “Cannibal Ogre” motif, and that it has been collected frequently in Sweden as well as southern Norway (81–82). Thompson (1977) noted,

Three or four different concepts seem to be thoroughly confused when the term “devil” is used by the teller of tales . . . [and] frequently means nothing more than the vague word “ogre.” Thus when they speak of the “stupid devil” they may equally well say “the stupid ogre” or “the stupid giant.” (42)

In the same work, Thompson noted that storytelling folk often do not make distinctions between their supernatural creatures. Ghosts are the same as the “Living Corpse,” who are the same as “Vampires,” and “Ogres” are the same as “Witches,” “Giants,” “Devils,” and “Trolls.” So, to return to the traditional Märchen, the witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” the giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood” can all be seen as using G312, “The Cannibal Ogre” motif; witches, giants, and wolves are all variants of this same kind of ogre figure. What differentiates category E from category G has more to do with their ethereal versus their corporeal natures. If the supernatural entity is of flesh and blood, then any of these category G terms will suffice.

Therefore, when it comes to attempting to apply Thompson’s *Index* to the zombie film, we also need to be equally flexible. Despite that the cinematic zombie is according to its nature perhaps best classified as E422, “The Living Corpse,” which is a more ethereal supernatural being, according to its behavior is perhaps better classified as a combination of G20, “The Ghoul,” and G312, “The Cannibal Ogre.” Yet neither category E nor category G is sufficiently descriptive of what we mean when we refer to zombies, either from the literature or from horror movies. Despite the occasional reference in Thompson to such and such a motif being from “Africa” or “India,” the *Index* is less helpful when one is attempting to research non-European motifs, such as the zombie. To get to these materials, one needs to avail oneself of a different kind of folklore research.

The Ethnographic Zombie

Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1938,

Here in the shadow of the Empire State Building, death and the graveyard are final. It is such a positive end that we use it as a measure of nothingness and

eternity. We have the quick and the dead. But in Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are Zombies. (Hurston 1990, 179)

There are three main anthropological, ethnographic, and folkloristic studies of Haitian *Voudou* and the zombie. The first was travel writer and adventurer William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1999), first published in 1929. *The Magic Island* was incredibly popular in the United States, and it is largely from Seabrook that the popular conception of the zombie originates. In 1938, Zora Neale Hurston published *Tell My Horse*, wherein the pioneering African American anthropologist describes her travels in the Caribbean (mostly Jamaica and Haiti) in the mid-1930s and her search for understanding the *Voudon* culture, including the zombie.⁹ Fifty years later, ethnobotanist Wade Davis (1994) followed Hurston's footsteps to Haiti, explicitly to find the scientific solution to the secret of the zombie, and his 1987 book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* was an instant best-seller, with Hollywood quickly buying the rights to Davis's story. The following year saw the release of this film, directed by Wes Craven.

Despite both the Hurston and Davis books, most casual perceptions of "voodoo" is as a "dangerous" religion, akin to Satanism, and the reality of the zombie as a modern monster has largely been fueled by horror cinema and popular culture. Karen McCarthy Brown (1989) referred to a distinct Euro-North American bias against the Haitian people in general and their "unofficial" national religion, *Voudou*:

It has been incorrectly depicted as magic and sorcery that involves uncontrolled orgiastic behavior and even cannibalism. These distortions are undoubtedly attributable to racism and to the fear that the Haitian slave revolution sparked in predominantly white nations. Haiti achieved independence in 1804, thus becoming a black republic in the Western Hemisphere at a time when the colonial economy was still heavily dependent on slave labor. (321)

The Euro-North American vilification of *Voudou* may very well be unconsciously (or even consciously) motivated by racist skepticism of a religion that is determined and controlled largely by nonwhites, and the resultant moral panics about such a culture's (fictional) excesses can be explained. Yet Seabrook, Hurston, and Davis, in addition to other anthropological literatures, did verify the existence of the Haitian zombie.

Brown (1989) noted that within *Voudou* exist practices that are locally referred to as "work of the left hand," magical beliefs and traditions that can be manipulated for (literally) "sinister" purposes (325). Included within these

“left-handed works” is the creation of zombies, which Brown defined as “either the disembodied soul of a dead person whose powers are used for magical purposes, or a soulless body that has been raised from the grave to do drone labor in the fields” (325). Within Hurston’s book we meet Felicia Felix-Mentor (Hurston 1990), and in Davis’s book we read about Narcisse, both of whom it was claimed were actual zombies. While within the *Voudou* belief tradition lies the conceit that both Felicia and Narcisse had died and been raised from the grave as slaves, most believed, like Haitian psychiatrist Dr. Lamarque Douyon, that a more pharmaceutical explanation lay behind the zombie mystery:

Though convinced zombies were real, he had been unable to find a scientific explanation for the phenomenon. He did not believe zombies were people raised from the dead, but that did not make them any less interesting. He speculated that victims were only made to *look* dead, probably by means of a drug that dramatically slowed metabolism. The victim was buried, dug up within a few hours, and somehow reawakened. (Del Guericco 1989, 328)

Hurston, thirty years earlier, spoke with then director general of the Service d’Hygiene, Dr. Rulx Léon, and both held the same belief that zombification was likely pharmaceutical in origin (Hurston 1990). It was this pharmaceutical solution that Wade Davis sought in the early 1980s and documented in his book *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Ironically, when Wes Craven came to film Davis’s book in 1988, he resorted to the kinds of sensationalistic stereotypes of “voodoo” and the scary “zombies” for which Brown aptly criticizes popular culture.¹⁰

An alternative perspective on the zombie emerges from this scientific literature: the zombie ceases to be the mindless monster battering down the shopping mall doors and emerges as more of a tragic figure whose memory has been chemically erased and sent to live a life of slavery. In Haiti, the fear of zombies comes not from meeting one on a darkened street but from being turned into one (Del Guericco 1989).

Yet, despite the sensationalistic title, the Val Lewton–produced and Jacques Tourneur–directed *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) actually goes out of its way to keep as close to the ethnography as possible within Hollywood. Although based on the nonfiction magazine story by Inez Wallace, Curt Siodmak’s screenplay appears to make extensive use of Seabrook’s and Hurston’s travelogues not only to create verisimilitude with the *Voudou* practices but also to weave together, under Lewton and Tourneur’s direction, a strong anticolonial discourse about the white presence exploitation of Haiti.

The Zombie of the Cinema

If we understand the movie monster as a metaphor for some form of social anxiety, the zombie becomes particularly apt. Certainly there seems to be a distinct disjunction in the displacement of the zombie from the Caribbean to the American screen. The early zombie films, most notably Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), seems distinctly at odds with the ethnographic materials currently available. Neither does it avail itself to Euro–North American zombielike motifs from folk narrative, as demonstrated previously, nor does it seem to be rooted within the Haitian traditions of *Voudou*, even at its most sensationalistic level. The film works more as a melodrama wherein a “witch doctor” (Bela Lugosi) is enlisted to enchant a young woman away from her fiancé, but instead the “voodoo priest,” Murder Legendre, falls in love with her himself and turns her into a zombie so she will stay with him forever. In the background are Legendre's zombie slaves toiling away in his mines. Despite the vaguely Caribbean setting of the film and the use of the term *zombie*, not a single character of African descent is visible. While this might not be too surprising for a film made in the early 1930s, Legendre's zombies are made not through the sensationalistic “voodoo” rites one would expect but more through a form of mesmerism. And yet, as David J. Sklar (1993) noted, *White Zombie* “was in many ways a nightmare vision of a breadline” (169). Sklar continued,

Zombies were especially handy in the present [Depression-era] economy, for, as San Francisco reviewer Katherine Hill quipped, “They don't mind about overtime.” And as if to reinforce the notion of zombies-in-the-here-and-now, she noted that the theatre management had positioned costumed members of the living dead throughout the lobby like so many potted palms. (169)

If contemporary film critics saw, in 1932, the metaphoric aspect of the zombie figure as reflecting those hardest hit by the Depression, eleven years later, in 1943, Steve Sekley's *Revenge of the Zombies* makes this connection even clearer. In this New Orleans set thriller, Dr. Max Heinrich von Altermann (John Carradine) is a Fifth Columnist raising an army of zombies for the Nazi cause. Here are the ultimate fighting force, who obey orders without question or sense of morality and, once killed, can be resurrected, like the stories from the Norse Vikings, to fight another day. Both of these films, despite the clearly expressed fear of the other as monster, contain some echoes of the Haitian fear of losing one's free will, of *becoming a zombie*, rather than meeting the monster itself.

Conclusion

The film version of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* is a true anomaly here: the anthropological and ethnographic source material is readily available for comparison with the film, and while resisting the immediate rejection of Craven's film as merely a poor adaptation, the trap is clearly set because the film not only keeps Davis's title but also purports itself to be both a "true story" about "real" zombies and tries to cash in on Davis's anthropological credentials. These issues of verisimilitude are beyond the scope of this book, however, other than noting yet another "folklore fallacy."

The ethnographic literature on *Voudou* and the figure of the zombie has not really found much of a home on the cinema screen despite the brave attempt in *I Walked with a Zombie*. The real fear of zombification, of not *meeting* a zombie but *becoming* one, is a much too subjective fear to be able to depict filmically. Instead, the study of folklore and film needs to focus on *how* the ethnographic and anthropological materials are being used within a specific film. Are the cultural metaphors found within (in this case) Haiti adaptable to Depression-era America in *White Zombie* or to wartime B movies like *Revenge of the Zombies*? And yet this is only one question the folklore-film nexus can explore on this subject.

Would that the search for evidence of folklore within popular culture were as easy as looking up a reference in Thompson's *Index* for "zombie" and finding a series of explicit examples of the living corpse from traditional folklore. This is not to say that similar stories did not occur in the oral tradition, but these references never manifest themselves quite so readily. The *Motif-Index* is, at best, a vague map of traditional storytelling, and the marginal notes that "here be monsters" are what we need to explore more fully. In attempting to identify traditional tale-types and motifs that have parallel references to, in this case, zombie films, the differences between our chosen films and the kinds of comparative source materials opens up certain questions that, while never being directly answered, at least can be appreciated as landmarks for further research.

So, while the hordes of "living corpses" attacking remote farmhouses are not readily found within Euro-North American folk narratives, the similarities in behavior of the modern cinematic zombie to folk monsters like the *sendung* or various ballad revenants is worth noting. But we can take this even further: recognizing that these folk revenants and ogrelike monsters are retributory figures, sent to avenge some kind of particularized wrong within the narrative world of the song or tale, what happens when we apply this notion to those cinematic clambering mobs of the living impaired? Are they,

too, implicitly to be sure, sent to right unspoken social wrongs? Despite no clear-cut correlation between the (European) folk traditions and the modern zombie film, placing these two phenomena side by side does create a discursive juxtaposition. So the real study of folklore and popular film lies not in uncovering direct and explicit representational issues but rather in exploring new discourses about either in light of the other.

Notes

1. This is a crude gloss on the early development of European folklore theory, and a much more thorough discussion can be found in Thompson (1977).
2. The so-named Aarne-Thompson index number after the authors of *The Types of the Folktale*.
3. These alphabetical and numeric groups refer to the motifs frequently found within these tale-types. I discuss these in this chapter.
4. All motif references refer to Thompson (1955–1958).
5. That is, to break down Thompson’s code somewhat, category E, motif 121, subsection 6, sub-subsection 1, or summarized E121.6.1.
6. Thompson did not tell us which part of Africa this motif comes from.
7. But *Night of the (Re)Vitalized Dead* just does not have the same ring.
8. Category F is “Marvels” and in particular features many different kinds of voyages to the Otherworld.
9. See Russell 2005, 9–18, for an excellent potted history of early-twentieth-century exploration of the Haitian zombie.
10. Even more ironically, according to the gossip on the Internet Movie Database, Davis sold the rights to his book to Universal only on condition that Peter Weir directs the film with Mel Gibson starring. Perhaps this explains why the Davis character’s name is changed to Dennis Allan (played by Bill Pullman) and so much deviation to Davis’s book occurs in the film.

CHAPTER FOUR



Orality as Methodology for Understanding Vernacular Comedies and the Comic Corpse

The taboo against contamination from a dead body is one of the most profound of all sociocultural inhibitions. I often find myself quite uncomfortable at funerals, knowing that contained within that box at the front of the chapel or synagogue lies what once was a living, breathing, or possibly even comic human being. Beyond the element of grief, of having lost a loved one, there is something psychologically disturbing about the presence of a corpse: it is a reminder that we ourselves are mortal and that we, too, one day, shall be lying in a similar box (see Freud 1950, 51–63).

Because of the profundity of that taboo, that almost universal fear of the dead, it is not surprising that popular films often draw on the discomfort of being near a dead body for narrative inspiration. What is obvious to folklorists, who are used to working with traditional and often orally transmitted narratives, is that these movies, while presenting themselves as “original” texts, are sometimes based directly on or even influenced by (whether consciously or subconsciously) traditional cultural beliefs. In chapter 3, I demonstrate some of the problems with using Aarne’s *Types of the Folktale* and Thompson’s *Motif-Index*. Problematic as such approaches may be, at least for identifying traditional motifs within the zombie film, these references can shed other analytical lights on contemporary cinema, even when not directly adaptations of folktales.

Take, for example, Thompson’s category K, “Deceptions.” Within category K is the following motif: K2151, “The Corpse Handed Around,” also known as “The Thrice-Killed Corpse.” Thompson summarily describes this

motif as follows: “Dupes are accused of murder when the corpse is left with them. The trickster is paid to keep silent” (Thompson 1955–1958, III.480). Thompson goes on to note that this motif is found primarily in two closely related tale-types: AT 1536C, “The Murdered Lover,” and AT 1537, “The Corpse Killed Five Times” (Aarne 1981, 442), both of which are categorized by Aarne and Thompson as “Jokes and Anecdotes,” in part explaining why these two tale-types feature little more than the single motifs noted above.

D. L. Ashliman (1987) expands on these tale-types in *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language* and identifies further subtle types within this area. Ashliman identifies AT 1536, “Disposing of a Corpse,” with the oft-cited urban legends “The Runaway Grandmother” and “The Dead Cat in the Package” (263–64).¹ In both of these legends, the problem of disposing of a corpse (whether pet or parent) is eliminated through the inadvertent theft of the corpse, thereby alleviating the protagonists of the responsibility of disposing of the corpse themselves.² Brunvand (1981), citing Alan Dundes, identifies this legend as emerging out of the youth-centered society we inhabit, with its rejection of the aged and its desire for inherited money and wealth. This links the modern legend back to “The Woman in the Chest” narrative, which I wish to focus on for a moment. Kurt Ranke’s *Folktales of Germany* tells the story thus:

A priest wanted to spy on the schoolmaster, whom he suspected of thievery. He put his mother in a chest, then took it to the teacher for safekeeping. The teacher discovered the spy and killed her, making it look like she had choked on a piece of bread. When the priest found his dead mother, he was afraid he would be accused of killing her, and he paid the teacher to help him prop her body at the top of a stairway in a tavern. A waitress accidentally knocked her down the stairs. Fearing prosecution, she paid the teacher to help her put the body in a field. A farmer, thinking it was a thief, struck the body with a stick. He too paid the teacher to remove the corpse. The teacher placed it in a sack and carried it into the woods, where he discovered some robbers. He took one of their sacks, leaving the sack containing the body with them. (quoted in Ashliman 1987, 263–64)

“The Woman in the Chest” narrative, although consisting of little more than the single motif (K2151), does demonstrate some wonderful complexities. For example, although the reference to the teacher’s thievery disappears after the first sentence, it is still implied that he is guilty, and he most definitely is guilty of the murder of an old woman, the mother of a priest. The teacher is rewarded for his deceptions: he is paid three times for the same body, and, although not stated directly, the robbers’ sack that he absconds with proba-

bly contains some kind of booty. None of the other characters' assumptions of responsibility for the death of the old woman demand that they do anything other than hire someone else to save them from prosecution or bother. If we can extrapolate from this narrative the development of specialized services, particularly those surrounding death, like that of undertakers and funeral directors, then a fascinating portrait of sociocultural guilt emerges. The priest (who should be responsible for taking care of his mother's corpse as both family and vocational duties demand), the waitress, and the farmer all *pay* someone else to do the work that they do not wish to do, in this case, the distasteful duties of corpse disposal. Like the urban legends "The Runaway Grandmother" and "The Dead Cat in the Package," these funeral responsibilities are placed on another who is paid exclusively for that kind of work, an aspect of this narrative in modern form noted by both Brunvand and Dundes (Brunvand 1981, 119).

Like "The Woman in the Chest," AT 1537, which Aarne and Thompson titled "The Corpse Killed Five Times," tells a similar story: to relieve themselves of the potential responsibility for someone's death (and the implied prosecution that entails), various individuals repeatedly set up the corpse to shift the responsibility onto others. Richard Chase tells this American variant titled "Old Dry Frye":

An old man choked on a bone and died. Afraid that he would be accused of murder, the host took the body to the road and propped it up. Some travelers thought the corpse was a highwayman and threw rocks at it. Seeing that the man was dead, they thought that they would be hanged for murder, so they leaned the body against a farmer's shed. The farmer thought it was a prowler and shot him. So it continued, until two rogues, also thinking they had killed the man, tied the body to a wild horse and sent him on his way. (quoted in Ashliman 1987, 264)

The difference between AT 1536 and AT 1537, according to the Aarne and Thompson typology, is the emphasis on the disposal of the corpse (AT 1536) rather than the shifting of the blame (AT 1537). The two films under consideration in this chapter, *Weekend at Bernie's* (Ted Kotcheff, 1989) and *Weekend at Bernie's II* (Robert Klane, 1993) are film versions of AT 1536, "The Disposal of a Corpse" anecdote outlined previously.

In *Weekend at Bernie's*, two young insurance adjusters, one hardworking and dedicated to moving up the corporate ladder, the other immature, slovenly, and apathetic to anything other than having a good time, discover an error in the books. While working on an excruciatingly hot Sunday afternoon, Rich (Jonathan Silverman) and Larry (Andrew McCarthy) discover that

four policies had been made out to the same person and were filed weeks after that person was dead. Discovering this oversight recoups over \$2 million for the company. Rich and Larry are anxious for Monday to arrive so they can bring this to the attention of their boss, the jet-setting Bernie Lomax (Terry Kiser), and, they hope, receive a much overdue promotion.

Bernie is thrilled with the discovery and invites the boys out to his mansion in the Hamptons for the Labor Day weekend as a reward. In reality, Bernie is less than thrilled. He has been using the company to launder money for the mob, and Rich and Larry have just discovered Bernie's dirty little secret. In desperation, Bernie consults mob boss Vito (Louis Giambalvo) for help and requests that Vito arrange for Rich and Larry to be killed while at Bernie's. Vito agrees, and Bernie retires home to arrange an airtight alibi.

Vito, however, thinks Bernie is getting to be more trouble than he is worth. Added to that, Bernie is having an affair with Vito's girlfriend, Tina (Catherine Parks). Vito, instead of arranging for Rich and Larry to be killed, has Paulie (Don Calfa) go and murder Bernie before the boys arrive. The next day, when Rich and Larry arrive on Hampton Island, they discover that Bernie is dead, apparently the result of an accidental drug overdose. Before they can inform the authorities, a "floating party" of rich neighbors arrives, and suddenly Bernie's home has turned into "Party Central," with no one noticing that Bernie, propped up on the settee, is dead. He gets seduced and propositioned and even ends up posthumously conducting business deals with his completely oblivious friends.

The next day, when Rich and Larry are once again going to attempt to contact the authorities, they discover Bernie's plot against them. Because they are under the impression that the killer is still coming for them and that the killer will not hurt them while Bernie is present, they concoct a series of ruses that give the impression that Bernie is still alive: dragging the corpse around, taking it boating, playing Monopoly, sitting in the sun, and getting them into parties. Their masquerade is so successful that word gets back to Vito that Paulie did not kill Bernie as planned, and Paulie returns to the island to get the job done properly.

I have outlined the plot of *Weekend at Bernie's* in such detail because, as a modern variant of AT 1536, character motivation within a "realist" or, at the very least, "plausible" plot is needed in order for this traditional motif to be filmically realized according to the strategies of "classical Hollywood cinema," the term given to how mainstream film constructs narrative logic. Other film narrative strategies begin with a traditional premise, and then the screenwriters develop the story to fill ninety minutes, as with *Alligator* (Lewis Teague 1980), where the urban legend about alligators in the sewers is the

narrative catalyst for a *Jaws*-like man versus big animal film. *Weekend at Bernie's* does the opposite. It wants to end up in the traditional narrative, and in order to get there, screenwriter Robert Klane develops the plot so we end up in AT 1536 rather than using it as a narrative catalyst.

Weekend at Bernie's is a modern variant of AT 1536a, "The Woman in the Chest": to avoid being blamed for Bernie's death and to fool the real killer, Rich and Larry spend the weekend creating the illusion that Bernie is still alive. He is propped up on sofas during parties, he is placed on the patio with a string strategically tied both to one hand and to a pulley system so Larry can pretend that Bernie is waving to passersby, his shoelaces are intertwined with those of both Rich and Larry for ease in walking (while Rich has his hand, ventriloquist's dummy style, up Bernie's jacket holding his head up), and he is even propped up in a boat to allow the boys access off the island. Such are the ruses that Rich and Larry concoct in order to maintain the illusion that Bernie is still alive.

Like both AT 1536 and 1537, the illusion that Bernie is still alive also confuses Paulie, who must constantly return to Hampton Island to finish his job. As in the traditional "thrice-killed corpse," Paulie kills Bernie three times: once by the overdose injection that actually kills Bernie; second, when Bernie accidentally slips off of a deck chair and lands on Paulie, the killer thinks Bernie is attacking him, and he strangles the already dead "assailant"; and, third, taking no chances this time, Paulie bursts into Bernie's house and shoots the propped-up Bernie six times in the chest.

Weekend at Bernie's also features another of Thompson's motifs about corpses: Bernie's alibi for when Rich and Larry are supposed to be killed allows him the freedom to be back in New York that night, thereby enabling him to have an illicit rendezvous with Tina. When Bernie fails to show up at the appointed time, an angry Tina arrives on the island wanting to know what his excuse is. She does not believe Larry and Rich when they tell her Bernie is dead and believes he is asleep in his room, where the boys have propped him out of the way. Tina goes up but does not emerge for another half hour, returning with a self-satisfied postcoital grin. When the bemused boys ask, "How was he?" Tina's reply is, "Never been better."³ Thompson identifies this kind of necrophilia motif as J1769.2.1.⁴ Unlike other forms of necrophilia, where the living engages in *intentional* sexual relations with a corpse, the essential dimension of this particular motif is the mistaken belief that the corpse is actually alive. On the one hand, in films, this can be represented by moments of horror—the unknowing person who gets into bed with a dead body discovers this and usually screams. Here the comedy works in reverse: Tina is unaware that Bernie is dead, even after, somehow, con-

summarizing their affair. Thompson distinguishes between two kinds of necrophilia based on their placement in motif categories: the one most appropriate to *Weekend at Bernie's* is this J-category motif, classified by Thompson as motifs about "The Wise and the Foolish." More specifically, Thompson places this motif within the "absurd misunderstandings" subcategory (J1750–J1849), an apt phrase for this motif given the current filmic context (Thompson 1955–1958, II.445). Here Tina is obviously foolish in not recognizing that Bernie is dead. The other kind of necrophilia is intentional and is classified by Thompson under a completely different category, "Sex" (Thompson 1955–1958, V.388).⁵

This last motif also points toward some of the social criticism that *Weekend at Bernie's*, as a modern variant of AT 1536 (1537), demonstrates. I noted that some of the traditional variants of AT 1536 and 1537 contain a subsumed social critique regarding the lack of responsibility for the dead within a community. Frequently, these stories seem to posit, it is just too easy to either blame or pay someone else to take responsibility. Those who shirk their duty are rewarded for it. In *Weekend at Bernie's*, the satire is aimed differently: Rich and Larry are too innocent to be accused of Bernie's murder, and at no time is Bernie construed as a "victim," at least not in any way that would elicit audience sympathy toward his death. Instead, the social criticism of the film is aimed at the "Hampton's Crowd," whose self-indulgences and self-obsessions make them oblivious to Bernie's dilemma. Neighbors invade Bernie's house, drink his alcohol, borrow his boat, and generally take advantage of Bernie's resources. Implied in all of this, as community standards on Hampton Island are never seen to be violated, is that Bernie is one of these people and would, should the situation be reversed, be equally unaware if one of his neighbors likewise died. At first, Bernie is still "the life of the party," as the film's tagline reads: falling on people, coyly supplying drugs from his pocket (actually, his guests only think he is being coy), refusing to accept an offer on his car, and later, when Bernie falls off of his boat as Rich and Larry are trying to get away, he ends up doing a macabre impersonation of "body surfing/skiing," much to the delight of his neighbors.

How alienated does a community have to be for this to happen? Roger Ebert, in his 1989 review of *Weekend at Bernie's*, criticized the film, in part, because this kind of comedy requires "the other characters to be so stupid" as not to notice that Bernie is dead. But what if, in part, that is the point of the film? Ebert continues, "We can't believe they could be so unobservant" (Ebert 1989, n.p.). It is unlikely that the intended audiences for *Weekend at Bernie's* are those who *do* spend their summers in the Hamptons or write film columns

for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The intended audiences for these films are more likely to be folk more akin to Rich and Larry than Bernie. In playing to that audience, director Ted Kotcheff and screenwriter Robert Klane seem to be implying that from the perspective of Rich and Larry (and those like them), these characters are that “stupid” and “unobservant.” The film must have met with some kind of audience, for in spite of almost unanimously bad reviews at the time, it still pulled in more than \$30 million in U.S. box offices.

In contrast to the moderate success of *Weekend at Bernie's*, the inevitable sequel did less well, in part, I believe, because it did not “speak” to its intended audience the way the first one did. *Weekend at Bernie's II* (1993) picks up almost immediately where the first one left off. Bernie is dead and in the New York City morgue; when the film opens, Rich and Larry (still played by Jonathan Silverman and Andrew McCarthy) are identifying the body (still played by Terry Kiser). As Larry signs for the release of Bernie's possessions, they discover a safety deposit box key for an offshore account in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In order to get access to that safety deposit box, they need to kidnap the dead Bernie and take him to St. Thomas.

Before they can do that, however, the mob, who wants the laundered money Bernie had in his possession returned, takes action. They send Charles (Tom Wright) and Henry (Steve James), two African American hustlers, to St. Thomas to consult with a voodoo priestess, the Mobu (Novella Nelson), who orders these two back to New York with a voodoo spell in order to resurrect Bernie. They hope that Bernie will then lead them to the missing \$2 million.⁶ While they are trying out their spell, Charles and Henry lose their live chicken and replace it with a pigeon. This substitution is not entirely successful, and Bernie can be reanimated only when music is playing. What ensues is a race between Charles and Henry and between Rich and Larry to determine who will hold on to the reanimated Bernie and be led to the treasure.

There is a folktale aspect to all of this; “reanimated corpse used to find hidden treasure” sounds like a Thompson motif, but I could not find any such reference. The living corpse motif (E422) is about as close to a traditional reference as I could ascertain in *Weekend at Bernie's II*. As I note in chapter 3, where reanimation occurs through a spiritual agency (demon, spirits, vampires, or, in this case, voodoo spells and music), it does fit within a certain aspect of folktale logic. Apparently this was insufficient to entertain an audience. Although *Weekend at Bernie's II* was given a larger budget (for exotic location shooting in St. Thomas), the film's gross domestic return was less than half of *Weekend at Bernie's* (approximately U.S. \$12 million).

Could Thompson's *Motif-Index* determine a film's success? As I demonstrate in this chapter, as well as the previous one, simply using traditional

motifs is not sufficient to make a successful movie. However, by utilizing a strong verisimilitude to traditional narrative patternings, which includes traditional motifs, a different series of demands on the audience emerges.

The degree to which the two *Weekend at Bernie's*'s movies appeal to the general moviegoing audience is the next aspect I wish to discuss. A crude but useful generalization is that when one speaks about mass media and the "general" audience, one is most often talking about oneself. Movie reviewers stand for the "average person," someone hired, in theory, to view all the new movies released and report on their quality in local and national newspapers, so the "average person" risks less of their increasingly expensive evening out at the movies on films they would not enjoy. Yet by definition of the job, movie reviewers are not "average people": anyone who views so many films per year is going to have a larger cache of filmgoing experiences with which to compare each new release. In their own way and to varying degrees, movie reviewers are movie "experts"; they have a degree of knowledge that raises them ever so slightly above the everyday rank and file of movie audiences. As their cache of filmgoing experiences increases, so does their overall knowledge of cinema; thereby, they develop a greater awareness of film *literature*; by exposure to so many different forms of cinema and filmic narratives, a greater field of comparison is open to those few individuals who see movies as our surrogates. In addition to this, journalists (movie reviewers in particular) and, even to a greater extent, film *scholars* (those with an academic background in film studies) are often older, better educated, and more bourgeois in their filmic tastes than the "average" moviegoer.⁷ Take, for example, Wally Hammond's (1999) review of *Weekend at Bernie's*, published in the British magazine *Time Out*:

A one-joke movie which moves puerile party humour from *Animal House* to the yuppie world of work. . . . Kotcheff aims straight for the juvenile and spends most of his effort, successfully, on getting the timing right for the endless gags with Bernie's cadaver propped up on the sofa, falling downstairs, etc. But it's strictly kids' stuff and quickly palls. (1150)

Although Hammond seemingly "enjoyed" the movie or at least recognized the successful comic timing of the gags, phrases like "kids' stuff" also demonstrate that, for him, somehow there is not enough to keep the film going. Perhaps the movie's major flaw is identified in Hammond's first few words, as he calls *Weekend at Bernie's* a "one-joke movie," a view echoed by both film critics Roger Ebert (1989) and Hal Hinson (1989), the latter writing for the *Washington Post*. Ebert criticizes the movie for its lack of sophistication, comparing it unfavorably to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry* (1955).

Likewise, Hinson regrets that the gags with Bernie's corpse are "played out coarsely." Yet, as I noted, *Weekend at Bernie's* was surprisingly successful at the box office. Therefore, in spite of the film's singular joke, its lack of sophistication, and coarse humor, somehow it found its audience.

One way toward explaining the dissonance between reviewers and audiences is based on the verisimilitude between *Weekend at Bernie's* and the AT 1536/1537 tale-type. As I note in chapter 1, it has been suggested that the most direct way for individual fiction films to be considered "folklore" is to follow some of the theoretical writings that tie folklore studies to literature. Neil Grobman (1979), for example, proposed that one must assess "how authors use folklore in their writings" (17–18). To follow this procedure requires the scholar to identify the author as being in direct contact with folklore and its scholarly debates. The problem with applying the "folklore and literature" debates to discussions about folklore and popular cinema is that individual authors whose connection with "folk culture" are more readily provable produce literary texts. Cinema and television are much more collaborative communicative media, and therefore, if one is required to make a connection between the text and "legitimate" folk culture, whose connection is to be considered authoritative? Bird (1996) noted a more progressive approach toward the verisimilitude between folk culture and popular cinema: we need to look at the resonance between traditional narration and popular cinema and see how similar narrative strategies can inform both folkloristics and film studies.

In highlighting the relationship between orality and literacy, Walter Ong inadvertently pointed toward a further understanding of *vernacular* cinema, that is, films that demonstrate high resonance with an audience but whose quality may confound movie reviewers. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong (1982) identified the "psychodynamics" of orality: those cognitive processes that characterize primarily oral cultures. The terms that we, in our highly literate society, use to describe the world around us—our very "literate" worldview—are often inappropriate to describe the worldview of primary oral cultures. Ong noted that orality in mass-mediated, technological societies like our own does exist in a secondary capacity. Yet conceiving of oral "texts," as well as other linguistic metaphors to describe primarily oral cultures, demonstrates our literacy prejudice (13). Ong noted that primary orality often lacks analytical discourse; that is, it lacks the discourse of introspection or self-reflexivity. Likewise, vernacular cinemas are often criticized for their lack of introspection and self-reflexivity, recalling Ebert's criticism of *Weekend at Bernie's* lack of sophistication.

Ong characterized oral narrational strategies through a series of “psychodynamics,” which I now wish to turn to in order to discuss, perhaps, what appealed to audiences about *Weekend at Bernie’s*, despite the lack of verisimilitude to the critical criteria of mainstream movie reviewers. To begin with, Ong (1982) noted the importance of mnemonics and formulae for recalling oral information: “In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes. You know what you can recall” (33).

In *Weekend at Bernie’s*, the frequent reiteration that Bernie is dead, that Rich wants to contact the authorities, or that someone is trying to kill Rich and Larry is evidence of this phenomenon. It is not necessarily that movie audiences are slow to pick things up or that because of MTV and the channel-surfing culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modern audiences have shorter and shorter attention spans. The way movie audiences receive and process information is not dependent on literary models. Instead, this kind of reiteration moves the narrative plot forward without dependence on literacy-like rereadings. Although we can go to see the same movie again or rent and even purchase a DVD of the film to watch whenever we want, these are secondary considerations for most moviegoing audiences. Films that demand rewatching, rewinding, and replaying are more “literary” in that in order to experience the narrative to its fullest, one needs to understand its overall structure.⁸ From a literary perspective, this demand is more “sophisticated,” more like “quality literature.” As Ong (1982) wrote, “In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing” (35). Ong again noted,

Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a “line” of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. . . . There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer [and moviegoer] surely on the track. (40)

Elsewhere, Marshall McLuhan (1964) noted that film is one of his “hot media”; that is, it is high definition. McLuhan also wrote, “High definition is

the state of being well filled with data” (36). All information required to make sense of or to enjoy a film needs to be transferred to the viewer in one sitting. In which case, orality models, particularly the psychodynamics of repetition and formulae, allow that “high definition” of data transference to occur more successfully than with literary models.

The characterizations in *Weekend at Bernie's*, painted in broad strokes, also demonstrate further verisimilitude with the psychodynamics of orality. To a literary audience, the “crude” polarizations within the film seem simplistic: neat, hardworking, responsible Rich/sloppy, lazy, irresponsible Larry; Rich’s virtuous girlfriend, Gwen (Catherine Mary Stewart)/Bernie’s adulterous gangster’s moll, Tina; live Rich and Larry/dead Bernie; and so on. But these binary oppositions, beyond Lévi-Strauss’s (1993) paradigmatic structuralism, are also one of the psychodynamics of orality:

The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. . . . Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulaic baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight. (Ong 1982, 38)

Although Hal Hinson’s (1989) review of *Weekend at Bernie's* gives a nod to the juxtaposition between the black comedy of the film and its sunny bourgeoisie beach setting, he still finds the film “coarse,” with “too many bimbos and too many drug jokes” (n.p.). In other words, the comedy of the film is too basic and, agreeing with Ebert, too unsophisticated. But those characterizations within the film are, I argue, the point: not in the sense of a sophisticated satirical juxtaposition of “bimbos” and “bourgeoisie”—satire being a literary phenomenon (see Bakhtin 1984)—rather, the film’s crudeness in characterization is a further dimension in the psychodynamics of vernacular cinema.

None of this is to say or even imply that *Weekend at Bernie's* is in any way a “progressive” film—that it somehow challenges the bourgeois notions of literary elitism. In fact, the ideology of the film is still quite conservative. Both Rich and Larry are white, American, male heterosexuals who believe that if they work hard, they will get their reward. Even though they do not get promoted as expected for revealing the scam to the corrupt Bernie, they do end up with a suitcase full of money, and Rich gets the white, heterosexual, wealthy girl.⁹ *Weekend at Bernie's II*, with its Caribbean setting, places African American characters within its diegesis. However, these are equally crude stereotypes: Charles and Henry, street hustlers who dress stereotypically, or the Mobu, a voodoo princess. Although in this film it is Larry who gets a girl-

friend, Claudia (Troy Beyer), an African American native of St. Thomas, she and her father (Stack Pierce), seemingly the island's only doctor, are also students of voodoo. Larry openly ridicules Claudia's beliefs, thereby making any kind of sexual consummation between them unlikely and avoiding the controversy of miscegenation. In case we are unsure that at some point when we were not looking Larry and Claudia might have gotten up to something of which the most conservative audience member might disapprove, the final piece of voodoo magic requires the blood of a virgin (continuing the long list of stereotypes). The only one who can offer said blood is Larry. Clearly and in no uncertain terms, neither of the *Weekend at Bernie's* movies is progressive in ideological terms. This, too, is one of Ong's (1982) psychodynamics: to challenge the social order, to call it into question or any of the precepts that make up that order, risks forgetting the generations of work that built it. Individually, an audience member may choose to accept, challenge, or otherwise problematize the films, but as a general address to a primarily audiovisual audience, vernacular cinema cannot encourage "intellectual experimentation" (Ong 1982, 41).

Nor can vernacular cinema (or primary orality) encourage intellectual experimentation in the realm of abstract and symbolic settings (Ong 1982). Although the worlds of the Virgin Islands or the Hamptons may seem exotic, as they are to Rich and Larry, the banal and everyday world of New York City, the office, their apartments, and their general lifestyles are all narrative contexts to which almost any audience can relate. Even the exoticism of St. Thomas and Hampton Island, which are treated as tourist destinations, underlines the verisimilitude to our own "lifeworld" (Ong 1982, 42). To create any kind of abstraction in setting, either symbolic or fantastic, requires analytical categories that are inaccessible to primary oral cultures. Likewise, in vernacular cinema, for an audience to engage with crude polarizations and stereotypical characters, the films must be set in a world to which they can immediately relate. During the opening credits of *Weekend at Bernie's*, which sets the scene during a record-breaking heat wave, a mugger attempts to "stick up" Rich and Larry on their way to the office. Larry pushes the gun to one side and says to the mugger, "Aw, get your ass outta here, it's too hot!" The scenario is a completely fantastic response to an all-too-real situation: being mugged in New York City.

Even Ebert's criticism that the characters in *Weekend at Bernie's* are just too stupid to be believed supports another of Ong's psychodynamics: Ong (1982) noted that primary orality is characterized by an agonistic tone; that is, the scenarios are distilled into two opposing points of view:

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. . . . By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates that knowledge within a context of struggle. (43–44)

The binary oppositions noted between Rich and Larry and between them and Bernie play an even larger role in vernacular cinema. The conflicts between these two camps (and the camps do shift within the diegesis) are the kinds of abstractions with which vernacular cinema, like primary orality, can operate. These oppositions encapsulate vernacular ideas that are demonstrated to the audience. In *Weekend at Bernie's*, Rich and Larry want to spend the weekend on Hampton Island/Bernie wants them dead; after Bernie dies, Larry still wants to party/Rich wants to call the police; Gwen wants to know the truth about what is going on/Rich does not want to tell her. Likewise, in *Weekend at Bernie's II*, Rich and Larry want to get Bernie's money/Charles and Henry want to get Bernie's money; voodoo is used for greedy purposes by the Mobu/voodoo is used for constructive purposes to save Rich. These dichotomies encapsulate debates within the diegesis contextualized, the "lifeworld" of the intended audience, and are presented without the mediation of literary analysis.

I have tried so far to demonstrate the similarities between Ong's primary orality and what I have been calling "vernacular cinema," but is this comparison fair? Put differently, even though the two media have similar psychodynamics, they are describing very different phenomena. We experience cinema, whether elite "art cinema" or vernacular cinema, through time. As I noted, although we can purchase a videocassette and fast-forward or rewind to specific sections (made all the more immediate through DVD technology), to experience a film requires an ordered sequence of narrative processes. Skipping ahead or going back to what one may have missed, although possible, is not part of general filmgoing. In other words, cinema is a largely homeostatic phenomenon. It is always experienced in the present, and references to the past are not referred to or demanded unless they have direct relevance to the present, just like primary orality, according to Ong (1982). In particular, the classical Hollywood mode of filmmaking, whereby narratives are situated within contexts that demonstrate a high degree of verisimilitude to the experiential "lifeworld" (49), with the direct intention of the audience's empathic participation in the diegesis, further underlines the similarities between primary orality and vernacular cinema. This is not to say that vernacular cinema is an equivalent of primary

orality—once a culture has achieved literacy, I know of no way in which that can be forgotten—but it does suggest that vernacular cinema is a kind of *neo-orality*: a new form of orality, or, because of its audiovisual bias, an orality-like phenomenon.

Therefore, if movie reviewers approach films like *Weekend at Bernie's* or its sequel from a literacy perspective, they are seeing films as though they were written instead of performed. This does the films an injustice. The address to their audience is not as literacy or even quasi-literacy but as audiovisual or neo-orality. As such, films like these need to be discussed within the context of the vernacular cinema tradition to which they belong.

Audiovisual neo-orality explains the address to the audience for films such as *Weekend at Bernie's*; it does not explain why the first film succeeded and the sequel did not. If I am even partially correct in my connection between the psychodynamics of primary orality and the address of vernacular cinema, then the content must also be vernacular. Folk narrative traditions, like the folktale, are one type of narrative content that has stood the test of time; these narratives would not be passed on to subsequent generations unless they had some relevance to the supporting culture. In fact, Dégh (1989) has noted that when folktales cease to reflect the culture, they do indeed fall into disuse. Folktales and narrative motifs regarding the problems of getting rid of a dead body, for example, can be told as jokes, be found as motifs in longer folktales, or even recontextualized on Hampton Island today in a movie.

The idea of problematic corpse disposal still has currency today (to the tune of over \$30 million in the case of *Weekend at Bernie's*). It does not matter whether screenwriter Robert Klane has a priori knowledge of this folktale or motif or not. It has been circulating in such a way as to connect with him profoundly enough to write the story in the first place. Something about it had a resonance, and he was able to convince others of that resonance, too. *Weekend at Bernie's II*, on the other hand, only had the resonance of the first film's success. By not developing other vernacular narratives, in spite of the vernacular form of address, it did not have resonance with the audience.

But these first chapters are only a start. We need to further investigate not only *how* contemporary filmmakers use traditional materials, for example, tale-types and folktale and urban legend motifs, but also how those audiovisual texts are then received by their intended audiences. In the next section of this book, I explore more deeply the traditions of belief that popular cinema can demonstrate, particularly when we look at films based on or about urban legends.

Notes

1. Aarne (1981, 441–42), on the other hand, uses AT 1536 as a category for the variations A to C and identify the larger tale-type number as being essentially the same as motif K2151, noted previously.

2. Harold Ramis's *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983) features a variation on the "Runaway Grandmother"/"Dead Cat in the Package," where the Griswold's family vacation is almost disrupted by the death of the much-disliked Aunt Edna (Imogene Coca) and her corpse left seated in a lounge in her son's backyard (see also Brunvand 1981, 103–23).

3. Rich complains that he always gets yelled at when he "just lies there."

4. Thompson (1955–1958) defines "J1769.2.1—Dead mistaken for the living" as "Man with abhorrence for corpse sleeps with one thinking it alive" (IV: 145).

5. T466—"Necrophilia. Sexual intercourse with dead human body" (Thompson 1955–1958, V.388).

6. Presumably, even screenwriter Robert Klane, who wrote both *Weekend at Bernie's* movies and directed the second one, forgot that Rich and Larry found and kept the money at the end of the first film.

7. In my own experience as both a writer and a reader of movie reviews, the position of "film critic" (as they like to be called) goes to the editor of the "Arts" section of various newspapers. Therefore, the local movie reviewer has established him- or herself an elite role within the newspaper work culture.

8. Linked with this formulaic psychodynamic, "oral structures often look to pragmatics (the convenience of the speaker . . .) . . . [as opposed to literary] structures, [which] look more to syntactics (organization of the discourse itself)" (Ong 1982, 37–38).

9. Rich, particularly as played by Jonathan Silverman, is encoded as "Jewish." On his first date with Gwen, who is equally encoded as "Gentile," he takes her to "Hymie's Hunan," a strictly kosher Chinese restaurant in the heart of New York's Hasidic community. However, despite the inclusion of this situational joke, Rich's and Gwen's ethnicity is largely ignored.

PART THREE

ISSUES OF BELIEF

CHAPTER FIVE



Discourses of Belief in *The X-Files*

In the next two chapters, I explore the frontiers of belief in urban legends within popular culture. Popular culture, as a whole, is one of the chief disseminators of urban legends in our contemporary society and not just through cinema. Television programs not only draw on urban legend materials for their stories but also, by retelling these legends, redistribute these stories to new generations. But, of course, these stories change over time, and the academic study of folklore (folkloristics) needs to not only identify traditional stories but also look at the changes to the stories' potential meanings when they are presented anew. It is within that ethos of folkloristics that I am approaching the Fox television series *The X-Files*, examining the potential loci of meanings that the legends performed on the show indicate.

I am not the first folklorist to explore *The X-Files*. Leslie Jones (1996), in "Last Week We Had an Omen': The Mythological *X-Files*," noted that "in many ways, the X-files themselves—those cabinets lined up against the wall behind Mulder's desk and under the window—constitute a motif index to contemporary legend" (78). Echoing Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index*, Jones noted that the television series functions akin to such a motif index. The idea is that the series was so rooted within urban legend, that each episode can be seen as a self-contained legend narrative, and that the X-files themselves, broken down into various independent phenomena for the FBI records, constitute such a motif index for legend.

Jones (1996), however, noted that such a use of folklore in popular media is nothing new: "Film and television have long drawn on the demons of popular

lore as material for their stories" (79). The problem is that in these adaptations of folklore into popular culture, little attention is paid to the actual belief traditions within the lore itself. These "demons of popular lore" are appropriated and recontextualized with little attention to the original cultural meanings such demons originally had. Jones refers to such adaptations (including *The X-Files*) as but notionally folkloric: "As a general rule . . . Hollywood has taken over little more than the *notion* of a particular type of monster; not only does Count Dracula bear little physical resemblance to the revenants of eastern European belief . . . , the sexual psychodynamic underlying nearly all vampire films . . . owes more to Freud than to folklore" (79). While Jones's assertion is true to some extent, particularly at a superficial narrative level, such folklore motif spotting is but half the hermeneutic game. To understand *how* popular film and television uses folklore motifs, we must dig deeper to see what happens when such motifs are recontextualized within the popular media text.

In order to further explore *The X-Files's* use of folklore materials, we first need to develop a kind of typology for this study. There are two major types of episodes in the series: the first category is what in common *X-Files* study parlance are known as "the myth-arc" narratives, those episodes that deal with the arc narrative of contact with intelligent extraterrestrial life forms (the "Greys"), Mulder's investigation into his sister's alien abduction, Scully's cancer, and the nefarious government cover-up of these incidents. The second category is referred to as "Monster of the Week" episodes (MOTW), stand-alone episodes where Mulder and Scully hunt down a different monster. The MOTW episodes can be further broken down into episodes of "literary fantasy," those that feature monsters created by the show's writers and based within the traditions of horror and science-fiction literature (rather than oral tradition), and those episodes of "legendry," those monsters that *are* based within a distinct oral tradition. It is to this last category that I apply the term *folklore files*.

Jones (1996) surveyed the first two seasons of *The X-Files* and on the basis of that analysis concluded that of these seasons, 35 percent of the episodes were myth-arc stories, 36 percent were what Jones refers to as "generic pop-culture weirdness" (i.e., literary fantasy), and 29 percent were what could be called "folklore files" (81). Roughly speaking, then, these three kinds of episodes break down into approximately even thirds—one-third of the episodes from each of the categories: myth-arc, literary fantasy, and folklore. It is to this final category, those episodes whose narratives are based within a preexisting oral tradition, to which I now wish to turn, with particular attention to two episodes: "The Jersey Devil" (1.04) and "El Mundo Gira" (4.11).

“The Jersey Devil”

First broadcast in early October 1993, “The Jersey Devil” sees Mulder and Scully in Atlantic City investigating an apparent attack from the legendary Jersey Devil, a monster based on “real” folklore, that is, based on actual lore that circulates within the oral tradition. In this episode, the folk belief in the Jersey Devil is “incorporated” into reality or, rather, into the “fictive reality” of the television show.

Jane Goldman (1995), in her guide to *The X-Files*, featured a lengthy discussion of “The Jersey Devil” episode. Goldman noted that “the original tale concerned a Mrs. Leeds, whose thirteenth pregnancy in 1735 was said to have led to the birth of a ‘devil child’ that flew away up her chimney” (138). As is typical of legend narratives, not only did the story of the Jersey Devil proliferate and change throughout the area that is now rural New Jersey, but many variant forms of the Jersey Devil story could also be identified. Loren Coleman, in *Mysterious America*, noted the various changes within Jersey Devil lore and associated phenomena attributed to the devil across the centuries.

The “Jersey Devil” has appeared differently to various witnesses—mostly “ram-headed and winged” in accounts from the 1700s: “a phantom livestock killer” in 1840; “the Devil” in 1873–74; “unidentifiable footprints” in 1894–95; again a “ram-headed, winged weirdie” in 1909; a “flying lion” in 1926; a “large, speedy, feathered animal running on four ‘legs’” in 1927; a “horrible monster” in 1928; a “half-man, half-beast” in 1932; an “upright devil” in 1935; “appearances” in 1941 and 1948; a “green male monster” in 1949; “something” killing chickens in 1952; “unearthly screams” in 1960; and a “seven feet tall, faceless hairy creature” in 1966. (quoted in Goldman 1995, 138)

Given Coleman’s litany of Jersey Devil–associated phenomena, one could also include the narrative’s manifestation in *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999) despite its Maryland setting. A year earlier, another pseudodocumentary, *The Last Broadcast* (Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler 1998), was produced explicitly about the Jersey Devil. Taking this legend as its basis, *The X-Files* episode avoids asking about the veracity of the story but instead posits what such a story would look like *should* it be true. What would the Jersey Devil look like, literally in(corp)orated, in the *flesh*?¹

At this stage, it is worth considering what the term *legend* actually refers to. Inherent in Elliott Oring’s (1986) definition, as noted in chapter 2, is the genre’s ambivalence²: not that these narratives are true or false, believed

or not believed (a superficial dichotomy, as I demonstrate below), but that their improbability within the world of the probable “engages the listener’s sense of the possible,” as Oring refers to it (125). When we listen to a legend narrative, rather than accept or reject the veracity of the story, we are invited to ponder the possibilities of what it would mean *if* such a story were true, even if the truth claims of the narrative are ultimately rejected. This is a narrative position *The X-Files* invites us to take.

Thinking about any of the “folklore *files*,” “The Jersey Devil” in particular, the episode’s writer (series creator Chris Carter) is less interested in the veracity of the Jersey Devil story than in hypothesizing that *if* a story were true, what would its subject look like? Carter transforms the New Jersey folk legend into a more *possible* explanation, to wit, transforming the Jersey Devil itself away from being Mrs. Leeds’s “devil baby” monster, and proposes these legends evolved around the existence of a “wild,” or feral, family. The Jersey Devil narrative is, in this episode, given a more cryptozoological explanation. This explanation is proposed and diegetically ultimately verified through an exposition sequence in the mouth of a university anthropologist, Dr. Diamond (Gregory Sierra). Within popular culture narratives such as these, if an anthropologist or other university-based expert says something is true, then it must be true. Typical of what I am calling “folklore *files*” is this interpellation of the televisual text with its intended audience, thereby inviting those watching *The X-Files* to debate not just the Jersey Devil story but also the possibility of the existence of a “wild man” in the Jersey Pine Barrens or anywhere else in modern America.

Far from reading too much into this episode’s use of folklore, not only does “The Jersey Devil” episode in(corp)orate the legend narrative into a *plausible* diegetic world, but Carter takes this dynamic a step further and reintroduces the narrative *back* into the oral tradition. At the denouement of the episode, both adult male and female “devils” are now dead. During the autopsy of the final female “devil,” the coroner notes that as an adult female, there was forensic evidence that she had given birth in the past. The final sequence of the episode features a father and son walking through the Pine Barrens. The father tells the story of the Jersey Devil to his attentive son; the camera stops, allowing the pair to cross the screen out of sight, and then pans down to reveal a child “devil” lurking in the brush. Rather than explaining “away” the narrative through its in(corp)oration of the actual belief traditions associated with the Jersey Devil legend with the feral family legends, Carter’s teleplay brings his forty-four-minute narrative full circle in demonstrating the persistence of the oral tradition. The “truth” behind the legend is here rein(corp)orated back into legend. Old folklore never dies.

“El Mundo Gira”

“El Mundo Gira” comes from the fourth season of the series, originally broadcast early in 1997. The story sees Mulder and Scully investigating the murder of Maria Dorantes, a migrant worker in a southern California workers’ camp. Was Maria the victim of jealousy between the two Buente brothers, the unfortunate victim of a love triangle? Or was Maria the victim of “el Chupacabra,” a demon from Chicano folklore? When this episode was first broadcast, I was a Ph.D. student in the Folklore Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Each Sunday, many of my fellow doctorate students would gather at each other’s homes to watch two of the most significant folklore television programs on air, *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files*.³ We watched “El Mundo Gira,” appalled at the “notionally” folkloristic narrative. This episode did not conform to any known traditions of “el Chupacabra” legendry. Even under the relatively broad rubric of “folklore files” that I argued previously, it would be hard to contend that the chupacabras of this episode were linked to the oral tradition in any way other than the appropriation of the name. At least with “The Jersey Devil” episode, the in(corp)oration of the legend was still grounded within a preexisting oral tradition. Despite Carter’s own admission that the “Jersey Devil” episode was inspired by François Truffaut’s film *L’Enfant Sauvage* (“The Wild Child” 1969) (Goldman 1995, 140), “wild man” stories have circulated, at least since the early fourteenth century, throughout Europe. Goldman noted “feral humans have been spotted, captured and studied ever since there were ‘civilized’ people with whom to compare them (140; see also Genge 1995). Despite “The Jersey Devil” episode deviating from Jersey Devil narratives, the story still had folkloric resonance. This was not the case in “El Mundo Gira”; the chupacabra of the episode is linked only tangentially within chupacabra narratives.

Chupacabra stories are relatively recent phenomena. Unlike the stories of the Jersey Devil, which have been circulating for at least a hundred years, chupacabra stories have really been circulating only since the 1970s (Genge 1997, 90). Literally translated as “goat sucker,” the chupacabra is a legendary beast that has been reported attacking livestock in Puerto Rico and moving into the Tex-Mex area. Livestock (mostly goats), found dead in their fields, had been utterly exsanguinated—hence the term “goat sucker.” Because of the mysterious deaths of the goats, often with accompanying mutilations, stories about the chupacabra were initially linked to the wave of cattle mutilation stories emerging out of the American Midwest in the 1970s and 1980s. Like the cattle mutilation stories, chupacabra narratives had possible

extraterrestrial explanations (Genge 1997). Descriptions of the chupacabra vary tremendously, but the more recent (ca. mid-1990s) reports begin to link the chupacabra with extraterrestrials. Prior to this, the chupacabra has been described as a “fox with wings, red-eyed, with nimble hands” or a “yard-long, cat-like animal with . . . brindled fur, long teeth, and huge webbed paws” that gives off a horrific odor (Genge 1997, 93). Many more recent drawings of the chupacabra, currently circulating on the Internet, further the extraterrestrial connection with the goat sucker: these artists’ renditions depict the chupacabra standing on its hind legs, small of stature, with a large, bulbous head and big black eyes. The graphic similarity with alien “Greys” is immediate. In one illustration, based on an eyewitness report by Madelyne Talentino in 1995, the “Grey”-like chupacabra drawing is further annotated with the following descriptions: “4 to 5 feet tall,” “big slanted red eyes,” “small holes for nostrils, lipless mouth,” and “thin arms with three fingered hands—with claws.” The difference between reports of “Greys” and this chupacabra is that the monster described here is covered with “fine grey fur with darker spots.” This convergence between chupacabra and the extraterrestrials in many respects makes these into furry “Greys.”

Like “The Jersey Devil” episode, “El Mundo Gira” in(corp)orates the legend of the chupacabra, offering an attempt at a plausible hypothesis. At least the episode’s hypothesis is logical within the diegesis of *The X-Files*. According to episode writer John Shiban, chupacabra deaths are a result of an enzyme that facilitates the extreme proliferation of a previously benign mold spore. The Buente brothers somehow excrete this enzyme, possibly from contact with an extraterrestrial presence, thereby causing the deaths in the episode, including that of Maria Dorantes. At that level of explication, “El Mundo Gira” is a typical “folklore file”: the legend is literally in(corp)orated, made flesh, through the agency of the (potentially extraterrestrial) enzyme. By the fourth season, *The X-Files* had increased its awareness of folkloristics, the academic study of folklore, which has its own critical theories, methodologies, and discourses. And in “El Mundo Gira,” the legend of the chupacabra, even in its *X-Files*-modified form, is presented folkloristically. The episode interpellates its awareness of folkloristics through this modified legend narrative; no longer is *The X-Files* content with being a “motif index of contemporary legend,” as Jones (1996) called it, but was increasingly interested in presenting such legends folkloristically.

More specifically, “El Mundo Gira” problematizes its own discourse on belief by offering a variety of narrative positions, and each of those positions resists an overly simplistic belief/disbelief dichotomy. In the episode, each of the characters holds a position on a belief spectrum, offering alternative per-

spectives on the degree of belief in the chupacabra story. The belief spectrum in the episode runs the gamut from seeing the legend of the chupacabra as literally true to a position of total disbelief in the story. The majority of the migrants in the diegetic work camp are positioned on one end of this spectrum, whose position of literal belief in the chupacabra is actively voiced by the character listed simply as “Village Woman” (Janeth Munoz). The dissenting voice of disbelief, significantly also coming from within the camp, is exemplified by Soledad Buente (José Yenque), who sees the legend as “just as a story to scare children” and in this case is being utilized to cover up a crime of passion, namely, that Maria Dorantes loved him over his brother Eladio (Raymond Cruz), who murdered her in a jealous rage. The other characters in the episode occupy spaces between those two points, including Mulder and Scully.

In this episode of *The X-Files*, episode writer John Shiban recognized the debates about belief current in folkloristics at that time (1997). By the mid-1990s, the belief debates within folkloristics can be characterized as a tension between the “cultural source hypothesis” and the “phenomenological approach.” The cultural source hypothesis situates a belief as emerging and dependent on the culture that produces it. Lauri Honko (1989), in “Memorates and the Study of Folk Belief,” noted that paranormal phenomena were “situations in which [a] supernatural tradition was actualized and [then] influenced behavior” (103), and his work exemplifies this approach. Such a perspective argues, in reference to “El Mundo Gira,” that it is perfectly reasonable for the migrant workers, such as the “Village Woman,” to assume that Maria was killed by the chupacabra because her culture keys her to believe in the reality of the monster. James McClenon (1994), who is highly critical of the cultural source hypothesis, “assumes that correspondences between specific cultures and their folklore accounts demonstrate that anomalous episodes are cultural products. Cultural source theorists tend to ignore the difference between firsthand and secondary accounts” (19). Returning to the “Village Woman’s” account of Maria’s death, although she arrived on the scene moments after it occurred, her account is still secondary, as she was not an eyewitness to the event itself. Despite not seeing the event herself, “Village Woman” is definite in her attributing Maria’s death to the chupacabra, based on her embodiment of the cultural source hypothesis: the chupacabra is the only culturally rational explanation for this event. Toward the end of the episode, the plot returns to the “Village Woman” telling her story, suggesting that the entire episode has been a visualization of her own narrative. Of course, such a narrative conceit is problematic, as we have seen elements of the story that the “Village Woman” could not possibly have been privy to,

such as Mulder and Scully's private discussions. "Village Woman's" account is interrupted by Gabrielle Buente (Simi), contradicting "Village Woman's" story, as Gabrielle was an eyewitness to some of the accounts in the other woman's story. As Gabrielle begins to tell her final part of story, the audiences watching the episode are denied any differentiation in visual style to the two narratives. Put into "cultural source" terminology, at least McClenon's critical account of it, the episode makes no distinction between firsthand and secondary accounts of the story. Both are unproblematically equal in their presentational authority, but one narrative is an eyewitness account, while the other is more based on gossip, conjecture, and "the culture source." *The X-Files*, despite sometimes playing with issues of character subjectivity, still conformed, visually, to an ersatz-omniscient sense of narration. While an alternative filming strategy could have problematized the subjective nature of the storytelling in this episode, to do so would have irrevocably changed the nature of the show. Such an alternative visual style, reflecting this changing narrative subjectivity, would also have altered the inherently ambiguous nature of legend telling, one that the series reflected, and is explicit in both Oring's (1986) and Georges's (1971) definition of the genre.

On the other hand, the phenomenological approach to belief studies argues that any account of the paranormal must recognize that an experienced phenomenon is at the heart of any account. Regardless of the cultural *interpretation* placed on any account of the supernatural, *something* was experienced. David Hufford's (1989) research into the Old Hag tradition in Newfoundland, *The Terror That Comes in the Night*, is probably the best example of this approach. In this work, Hufford attempted to understand the experience of sleep apnea as it is interpreted through the cultural interpretation of being sat on by (variously) a witch/hag or succubus in one's sleep. In an earlier piece, Hufford (1976) noted that the "statements by informants refer with fair accuracy to an actual phenomenon which has been experienced by a number of people, rather than to traditional elaborations on mundane dreams" (19). Hufford's reference to "traditional elaborations on mundane dreams" is a specific swipe at Honko's cultural source hypothesis; Honko quipped that a vision of barn fairies may be put down to falling asleep after eating a large meal, but he was being flippant in his piece. Perhaps Hufford, in developing his phenomenological approach, did not fully appreciate Honko's sense of humor, and this has led to the schism within belief studies. The debate between cultural source and phenomenological approaches is more or less a straw man, as Honko's approach is just as experience centered as Hufford's. Be that as it may, the distinction here is one of focus: whether

the focus is on the cultural *explanation* of the event (the narrative) or digging below the narrative to ascertain the *phenomenon* behind it (experience).

Returning to the discussion of “El Mundo Gira,” Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent Lozano (Rubén Blades) exemplifies a more cultural source hypothesis. Lozano notes that the migrant workers need to “invent” monsters like el Chupacabra to make their sad and impoverished lives more interesting. Like McClenon’s criticism of the cultural source hypothesis, Lozano remains unconvinced about the veracity of the chupacabra explanations. Throughout the episode, he remains highly cynical and skeptical. The agent is so demoralized and disenchanting with his impossible job, patrolling the border of the Mexican frontier and policing illegal immigration, that he cannot take seriously the stories of chupacabra attacks surrounding him. While Honko’s reference to barn fairies was intended as flip-pant, Hufford took it at face value and saw instead a dangerous cynicism. Lozano in(corp)orates the cynical interpretation of Honko’s cultural source hypothesis (via Hufford or possibly McClenon), noting the false and culturally stereotypical names his detainees give his agents on their arrest. As Lozano approaches the cell holding Eladio Buentes, he sardonically notes, “Whoever this is, I don’t think it’s Erik Estrada.”

Scully, on the other hand, appears to exemplify a more phenomenological approach to the chupacabra story. Scully recognizes that these chupacabra attacks are cultural interpretations brought on by a rampant fungal infection, accelerated by the enzyme the Buente brothers apparently excrete. At the heart of Scully’s investigation is the experience that caused the death of Maria Dorantes and several others throughout the episode who are unlucky enough to come into contact with Eladio and his enzyme. Unlike Lozano, who seemingly dismisses the stories about chupacabras out of hand, even as the body count rises, Scully may dismiss the supernatural explanation but understands that underneath that interpretation lies some phenomenon that needs investigating. However, Scully, as one of the show’s central protagonists, as the voice of the phenomenological/experiential dimension of folkloristic belief research, suggests that this is the series’ perspective too. As any episode of *Scooby-Doo* can attest to, cultural source hypotheses are easily derived: we only think we are dealing with the paranormal because, culturally, we expect to be encountering ghosts when we walk into a “haunted house.” Scully and, by extension, the show’s producers understand that *regardless* of any cultural interpretation of a phenomenon, behind the narrative lies a real and actual experience. Whereas Lozano’s perspective dismisses the chupacabra stories as inventions of an ignorant and superstitious “folk,” Scully sees the chupacabra stories as a means of interpreting anomalous phenom-

ena, but some phenomena are recognized as having been experienced nonetheless. This perspective is subtle and complex, not nearly as easily derived as Lozano's cultural source hypothesis. Fictional television series, less concerned with academic perspectives on folklore,⁴ tend to fuse all elements of folk tradition into a single homogeneous mass with little attention to cultural meanings or the phenomenon behind such lore, that is, they fall victim to the "folklore fallacy" arguments I make in chapter 2. To problematize the debates about belief, to problematize the truth/fiction dichotomy of legend narration, requires some grounding in folkloristics. At the very least, such perspectives require an experience of these debates. In other words, someone on *The X-Files* staff knew their folkloristics.

"El Mundo Gira" further reflects the cultural metaphor of folklore narration in its use of the alien motif. The migrant workers on whom this episode focuses are "illegal aliens," not in an extraterrestrial sense of the word but as nonlegal workers and residents in the United States. *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld 1997) played with this idea by constructing a rigid bureaucracy for extraterrestrial visitors to Earth requiring immigration papers and work visas. In this *X-Files* episode, the focus is firmly on those (human) foreign workers who enter the United States illegally. As Scully, herself, notes in the episode, "The only aliens in this story are not the villains. They're the victims." At the episode's conclusion, Mulder and Scully have called in the "HazMat" (hazardous materials) team to isolate the rampant fungus. As the episode has played with narrative perspective all the way through, the arrival of the HazMat team is seen differently from those experiencing this arrival. First we see the "Village Woman's" perspective: a blinding flash of white light is followed by dozens of Greys/chupacabras coming over the hill in an invasion scenario. A few moments later, viewers are presented with Mulder and Scully's perspective, as they retell their story to Deputy Director Skinner (Mitch Pileggi). The same event, the arrival of the HazMat team, is replayed, only instead of aliens/chupacabras, humans in white contamination suits are shown. While a cultural source explanation would dismiss "Village Woman's" story about the arrival of chupacabras from outer space, Mulder and Scully's explanation demonstrates the phenomenon behind "Village Woman's" story.

The connection of chupacabras with extraterrestrials, as I noted previously, has echoes within the oral tradition, specifically in the Grey-like faces some chupacabra eyewitnesses have identified. "El Mundo Gira" furthers this tradition while also problematizing it. At least twice in the episode, a large piece of graffiti appears in the *mise-en-scène*; the graffiti reads "Chupacabra Vive!" (Chupacabra Lives!), accompanied by a crude drawing of a face, supposedly of

a chupacabra. But the face, as any fan or follower of UFO lore could attest, is that of an extraterrestrial Grey. The final time the graffiti is shown, amended into the plural once Soledad has joined Eladio and the two chupacabra brothers migrate down back toward Mexico, episode director Tucker Gates does a fade transition into the next scene: Mulder and Scully debriefing Skinner. The fade transition, however, positions Skinner's face in the same position of the frame and occupying the same space as the Grey/chupacabra face in the previous shot. Gates is making a clear equation between Skinner and the chupacabra graphically while opening a discursive can of worms at the same time. As the chupacabra is equated with extraterrestrial Greys, so too does Skinner become equated with alienness. This is not to suggest that *The X-Files* is suggesting that Skinner is, in fact, extraterrestrial but that potentially we are all "alien" to each other. Keeping in mind how the episode has been playing with narrative perspectives, for example, the "Village Woman" seeing extraterrestrial chupacabras while Mulder and Scully see the HazMat team, to the migrant workers Mulder and Scully are just as alien as the chupacabra. Illegal migrant workers are referred to as "illegal aliens," an equation Scully herself makes, quoted earlier in this chapter. "We" see these Mexican workers as alien, "they" see the American government officials as equally alien. Earlier in the episode, when Mulder and Scully first enter the migrant workers' camp, they are mistaken for INS officers looking to arrest and deport the "illegals." Mulder's exclamation that they are not from the INS but are FBI is to no avail. As the migrants scatter, we can see that to these laborers, there is little difference between these two government agencies. As government agents, Mulder, Scully, and Lozano are threatening alien invaders, while "white America" views "illegal aliens" as a similarly threatening "invasion." The fade transition I began discussing brings these shifting perspectives full circle. While the chupacabras may have migrated back to Mexico, and whether or not the Buentes brothers' enzyme is extraterrestrial, the discourse "El Mundo Gira" ends by questioning who is alien to whom.

Conclusion

As I have been arguing throughout this book, it is insufficient for folklorists examining popular culture to leave their discourse at the level of merely identifying folkloric motifs within film and television texts. I, disparagingly, refer to such identifications as "motif spotting." Scanning various episodes of *The X-Files* for the folklore items utilized may be an enjoyable pastime but in itself is insufficient scholarship. Jones may be correct that the file cabinets in Mulder's office constitute a veritable motif index of urban legend,

but what does such a motif index mean? Like Mulder's own investigations, this index just gathers dust down in the FBI basement.

Like the legends themselves, filmic and televisual representations of urban legendry are a useful barometer to contemporary social norms and beliefs. Or, rather, these *X-Files* episodes reflect the kinds of debates surrounding specific beliefs that such legends embody. Why is a "wild man" hypothesis more plausible in "The Jersey Devil" than a monster that had sprouted wings and flown up chimneys? Why are two Hispanic brothers secreting a fungal accelerant enzyme more relevant to America in the mid-1990s than a previously undiscovered breed of cat/foxlike animal? Or even of extraterrestrials? How these episodes posit the legends for debate around the quasi-logical/plausible explanations versus the traditional legend stories themselves interpellates the viewer into this kind of discussion.

"El Mundo Gira," however, ups the discursive ante by offering for debate less the veracity of the legend (as "The Jersey Devil" does) than the positions along a complex belief spectrum. No longer is the debate sufficient to rest on whether such a story, like the chupacabra narrative, is true, false, or neither true nor false. Instead, the debate is focused more on the *kind* of belief people who respond to the narrative demonstrate. Such a complex narrative approach reflects an awareness of contemporary folkloristics, specifically how folklorists were debating issues of belief (often around legends and the supernatural) in the mid-1990s.

While it is clear that *The X-Files* writers knew about folklore, and perhaps someone on the show was actually trained in folkloristics (or at least knew such an academic discourse existed and knew where to find interesting material for the series' scripts), left at that level, motif spotting has simply been replaced by a more arcane form of *academic* motif spotting—spot the academic debate. In a previous study I conducted on another *X-Files* episode ("Kaddish," also from the fourth season), I explored the fan discussions after the show had aired specifically looking at the discussions on the episode's use of the Golem legend from Jewish folklore (see Koven 2000). Several significant points emerged from that study: first, that *X-Files* fans *discussed* the episodes' use of folklore at all; second, that these fans were well versed within the folklore traditions being represented; and, third, that beyond the "nit-pickers" (who find fault in everything), many fans were holding the original folklore narratives up as templates to the show and the changes the scriptwriters made to the lore discussed to see how it fit (or did not fit) into the series' own arc narrative about Mulder, Scully, and their relationship. In other words, although I did not make this argument at the time, the kinds of discussion evident around the series' use of folklore demonstrates an *active*

television readership and debates about the legends themselves, well beyond the issue of the legend's veracity, reflecting the kinds of debates about the possible that Oring (1986) and others name as an essential defining characteristic of the legend as genre.

This chapter is not an audience study of *how* the fans of the show debated these two other legends. Here I undertook a textual analysis of two episodes, demonstrating how the series invites such discussion, within a framework of legend collection and folkloristic debates about belief. As a metatext, *The X-Files* can be seen as legendary, itself, for the truth is not in any hermeneutic textual analysis but, rather, "out there" in the debates each episode evoked. These cultural debates about belief are also evidenced in other cycles of popular culture, as I discuss in the next chapter.

Notes

1. It is worth noting, at least in passing, that Coleman enjoyed *The X-Files* episode and was surprised by the number of Internet comments following its broadcast claiming the show had got the legend "wrong" (cited in Goldman 1995, 139). This dynamic of the show's fans criticizing the series for getting the legendary facts wrong is also the basis of my article (see Koven 2000).

2. Robert Georges's definition of *legend* further underlines the ambivalence of the genre. Georges (1971) noted, "A legend is a story or narrative that may not be a story or narrative at all; it is set in the recent or historical past that may be conceived to be remote or antihistorical or not really past at all; it is believed to be true by some, false by others, and both or neither by most" (18).

3. A discussion of folklore in *The Simpsons* falls outside the purview of this work. However, this other Fox TV series is equally a rich mine of folklore motifs and discourses on which someone should write.

4. For example, *Supernatural* (WB, 2005 to present).

CHAPTER SIX



“Buzz Off!”: The Killer Bee Movie as Modern Belief Narrative

Larry Danielson (1979), in his examination of the use of urban legends in contemporary horror films, concluded with the observation that “popular cinematic art can both promulgate and reflect oral traditional plots and their motifs in contemporary circulation *as well as the anxieties that create them*” (219, emphasis added). I was procrastinating in early March 1995, when I tuned into the Rochester, New York, Fox television network affiliate, where much to my surprise they were broadcasting a new made-for-TV movie about killer bees called *Deadly Invasion: The Killer Bee Nightmare* (Rockne S. O’Bannon 1995). “Why?” was my immediate reaction; why almost twenty years after the wave of rumor panics, belief narratives, and truly dreadful movies about killer bees would anyone make another one? I then began to think about how Danielson noted that when we tell legends in different time periods, they often reflect the differences in cultural perspectives of the time periods in which we tell them. These lines of questioning are what initially informed the following study: a comparison of the different belief narratives about killer bees portrayed in the media, with specific attention to their cinematic narration, between the largest cycle of narratives in the late 1970s and the potential for a renewed cycle of narratives in the mid-1990s as exemplified by *Deadly Invasion*. It was the comment by Danielson that occurred to me while watching *Deadly Invasion*: what *are* the contemporary anxieties that inform this film, and how are these anxieties different from the cycle of killer bee movies made in the late 1970s?

Beliefs about the Bees

Writing almost ten years after Danielson, Gary Alan Fine (1993) noted a similar corelationship between urban legend narratives and their reflection of contemporary anxieties: "Since folklore responds to anxiety, narratives deal with those issues that surround social transformations. Contemporary legends have changed as the social problems (and the perception of these problems) shift" (319). It is not surprising, then, to discover that the fears reflected in the cinematic killer bee legend narratives reflect anxiety in contemporary society. By focusing on the changes to contemporary anxieties, changes to the narratives' classificatory position also occur. In order to assess the anxieties about killer bees from a contemporary perspective, I utilized two lines of inquiry: I put out a general inquiry on the e-mail-based "Folklore Discussion Group," asking whether that group's readers (predominantly professional academic and applied folklorists and their students) had heard any stories about killer bees (in 1995), and I conducted a more informal street-based survey wherein I approached people on the streets of St. John's, Newfoundland, with the same question and tape-recorded their responses. One of my Folklore Discussion Group respondents replied with the following:

Sure . . . I know about killer bees. They were carried by boat from Africa to South America. They have slowly been flying from South America to the United States and have already been spotted in Florida. When I was a kid living in Louisiana, we were certain that the killer bees would soon be spotted in our area, and we would never be able to leave the house again. (personal correspondence)

Is this narrative about killer bees a legend? The action of the bees being brought to South America, their subsequent escape, their movement northward, and their observation in Florida occur in a regressive temporal displacement; the bees are the specific referents in the narrative, and although told as truthful, no one necessarily believed that once the bees arrived (if they have in fact arrived), "we would never be able to leave the house again." Modern belief narratives then, although "told as true," do not depend on total belief for their function. To reiterate what Elliott Oring (1986) noted, legend "is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation; consequently, the art of legendry engages the listener's sense of the possible" (125).

Two men I spoke with on the streets of St. John's display this negotiation of the possible:

A: They originated in South America, I think.

B: Wasn't it the African bee that got released somewhere and then . . . ?

A: It worked its way through?

B: It wasn't its natural habitat; it sort of adapted and has intermingled with other native species of bees.

A: They're taking over! . . . What I've heard is that they just swarm for no apparent reason and where *generally* a bee won't do anything to you, unless you swat at it. (personal interview)

What these two men's narrative demonstrates is one of the more fascinating aspects of these belief narratives: the mixture of information, often distributed by the media, and speculation. This issue of the combination of information and speculation within urban legends is particularly relevant to the narratives about killer bees: although the original cycle of narratives petered out in the late 1970s, not long after the massive wave of media stories and films about the bees began, the impetus for the cycle's end was probably due to increased media proliferation that resulted in increased entomological information being released to the public to prevent widespread panic about the bees and their northward progression. However, as these narratives demonstrate, almost twenty years later, speculation about the threat of the killer bee persists.

If these kinds of films function as belief narratives, then surely their impact on legend diffusion would be great, based on the sheer number of people this form of media could reach. This impact has been so great, in fact, that Mark Winston (1992) began his book *Killer Bees* by referring to the bees as “the pop insect of the twentieth century” (3). One of my Internet informants noted, “The border town of Hidalgo, Texas [where residents have recently spotted the bees] has a huge statue of a killer bee” (personal correspondence).

Beyond *Deadly Invasion*, in this chapter, I look at two films that were readily available on videocassette from the 1970s: *The Bees* (Alfredo Zacharias 1978) and *The Swarm* (Irwin Allen 1978), along with Jack Laflin's (1976) novel also titled *The Bees*. These pop-cultural media texts have been responsible for much of the hysteria surrounding the killer bee. Ostensibly, the films and Laflin's novel are based on scientific evidence. However, the entomological evidence in these popular-cultural texts has been exploited and distorted for entertainment purposes. In the following section, I discuss the scientific basis for these belief narratives. Both Zacharias's film and Laflin's novel (unrelated but both titled *The Bees*) opened with supposed “factual” information. First from the movie: “[Killer

bees] without provocation attacked and killed countless animals and scores of humans. . . . At this moment, South America has been completely invaded. So far there are no means to prevent these deadly insects from taking over the entire Western hemisphere.” Laflin’s foreword began in much the same way:

What gradually caused docile, domestic insects whose normal function was to gather honey [sic] and pollinate crops to become cantankerous assassins, prone to strike without warning, kill people and animals, spread terror throughout an entire continent? . . . [The bees] have spread like a brushfire over much of the South American land mass, hijacking and Africanizing *linguistica* hives wherever they came across them. Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, parts of Chile and Peru all felt the presence of *adansonii* within their borders. (1–2)

And even 1995’s *Deadly Invasion* opened with similar “factual” data: “It is speculated that by the end of the decade killer bees could have spread across most, if not all of the continental United States. The following *could be* a true story.” *Deadly Invasion* even went as far as to append itself with a brief five-minute “documentary,” where bee wrangler Norman Gary explained what the real threat from the killer bee is: “Only time they are a problem is when a hive is disturbed.” What these excerpts explain is that belief in the premise of an impending killer bee invasion is essential to the narrative’s impact, and in this sense, these narratives function as urban legends. Larry Danielson (1979) noted that films like these have a major role in the construction of legend texts: “The films forcibly remind us of the roles modern media play in the re-animation, intensification, and distribution of folk narrative” (219).

Carl Lindahla (1996a) stated, “No longer considered simply ‘a narrative set in the past and believed to be true,’ the legend is now judged a debate about belief” (69). Many of my Internet and interviewed informants made comments that also reflected the belief in the threat from the bees. One stated, “There are supposedly documented attacks, but it’s not as great a threat as [1970s TV show] *That’s Incredible* likes to make it out to be” (personal interview). Another informant stated,

I sort of believe [in them] a bit, but not to the extent that . . . I am sure that there are bees, or a genus of bees that are poisonous to people. Obviously people are allergic to bees, so . . . it may have originated out of that somehow. Bees do swarm and they do move . . . to a certain extent . . . and that’s what I hear.

I always interpreted it as just being a person’s reaction to the sting as opposed to . . . the actual sting [being more poisonous]. (personal interview)

Others were more assured in their beliefs about the threat from the bees. “They swarm after you and and . . . kill you,” said one person I interviewed, while another person was a bit more descriptive: “They come out of nowhere in these great swarms and when they hit, you can’t get away—you’re dead basically” (personal interview).

Bee-ing Scientific

All honeybees are the same species of bee, *Apis mellifera*; however, the “race” of bee can differ, and different regions of Eurasia and Africa have developed different breeds of the *mellifera*. Queen bees were brought from African colonies to Brazil because of rumors of this breed’s increased honey production. The “Africanized” or Brazilian honeybee is the more appropriate name for this creature: the hybrid resulting from crossbreeding between African and European honeybees. Although both the Brazilian and the European honeybee are essentially the same size and one’s venom is no more toxic than the other’s, the Brazilian honeybee is more territorial and more aggressive, which is why we have saddled it with the moniker “killer”:

Without a doubt, the most alarming and best-known attribute of Brazilian bees is their aggressiveness. Individual stings are comparable to stings of other races of the species. But Brazilian bees, especially in the northern states of Brazil, differ dramatically from nearly all European bees in their great sensitivity to colony disturbance, their ability to communicate alarm within and between colonies, and their capacity to respond quickly by massive attack on intruders. (Michener 1973, 524; also supported by Winston 1992, 53)

Even from a few basic “scientific facts” about the “Africanized” honeybee (its increased honey production, its aggressiveness, and its behavior), the ground seems ripe for further legend materials to spread (or pollinate) because the story of the Brazilian honeybee so closely resembles the enslavement and transportation to the New World of African peoples. Specifically with Irwin Allen’s *The Swarm*, the Brazilian honeybee seems to act as a metaphor for white paranoia about African Americans in the United States, which I discuss later.

How the African bees came to Brazil is a story well documented with enough consistency in several sources that it can be considered “true”: Warwick Kerr, a Brazilian geneticist, heard about the increased honey production of the African honeybee, imported some queen bees, and crossbred them with his own European honeybees (Michener 1973; Winston 1992; see also Laflin 1976). However, *how* these hybrid bees escaped, turned feral, and spread across South America heading for (the implied greener pastures of) North America demonstrates sufficient variation to call it legendry. Michener (1973) best told the story of the bees’ escape:

In 1957 . . . a visiting beekeeper, not understanding the precautions in the apiary at Rio Claro against the escape of queens and drones, removed the queen excluder¹ at the hive entrances. Before his action was discovered, twenty-six swarms headed by queens from Africa had escaped. (523)

Another version reads, “A visiting bee keeper accidentally tripped a lever and twenty-six swarms of the hybrid bees escaped, and quickly began to dominate breeding, reducing honey production and increasing ferocity” (*Fortean Times* 1980, 14). The *Fortean Times* article demonstrates how such stories become embellished, that is, the bees’ “increasing ferocity.”

A further step toward rumor replacing science occurs in Zacharias’s film *The Bees*. The opening sequence of the film is a reconstruction of the bees’ initial escape from their Brazilian apiary. However, in this version, a poor Brazilian beekeeper and his son break into an American-run apiary to steal honey and accidentally open the wrong hive. Dr. Miller exclaims dramatically upon discovering his “experimental” hives destroyed, “God dammit! Instead of robbing the domestic hives, they had to meddle with these *killer bees!*”

Perhaps the most ambiguous aspect of killer bee lore, which is most frequently iterated in these legends, is the ferocity of the attacks. Only one of my St. John’s informants identified the fact that the bees first need to be irritated before they attack, but then, as he puts it, “they go berserk” (personal interview). The seemingly unprovoked nature of these attacks is also repeated in the killer bee films, with greater or lesser degrees of provocation. For example, Zacharias’s *The Bees* features three provoked attacks: a wayward basketball rolls into a heavily infested cave, a child maliciously throws a baseball at a hive, and a pedestrian walks under a boardwalk only to stumble upon a hive. The film also has two totally unprovoked attacks: the swarm initially lands on a crowded beach and eventually decides to attack an eques-

trian club. This film is quite unlike the other two films, which have either totally unprovoked attacks because the bees (somehow) want to take over the state of Texas (in *The Swarm*) or entirely provoked attacks: car horns blasting too close to the hive, amp feedback and loud rock music in too close proximity to an Africanized apiary, and a kid who takes a couple of shotgun blasts to some hives (in *Deadly Invasion*). Other news and news-related sources confirm the provocation needed for “killer” bees to attack, even if that provocation is unintentional. *The Fortean Times* has reported the bees attacking funerals (1994–1995) and schools (1980). Some reports focus on the sheer number of stings. For example, “One man, agonized by a thousand head stings, shot himself dead,” and another report mentions more than three hundred stings (both reports *Fortean Times* 1992, 17). Likewise, the three attacks mentioned in Kohut and Sweet’s (1993) *News from the Fringe* were all unintentionally provoked attacks, from lawn mowing to insecticide sprayings. All the informants I spoke with in St. John’s were under the impression that these bees attack totally unprovoked, except the one informant above who identified that the bees first have to be disturbed in some way before they attack.

Being Anxious

What are the contemporary anxieties that these films reflect? Although all these narratives are about the threat to the United States from the Africanized honeybee that ostensibly should classify these narratives as, according to Brunvand, “Animal Stories/Legends” (cf. Brunvand 1986, 1989) or “Contamination” stories (cf. Brunvand 1981, 1984, 1986), their individual anxieties reflect a difference in their taxonomic positions.

For example, Zacharias’s *The Bees* reflects the concern that various interest groups, from big business to the government, are illegally smuggling the bees into the United States. The business concerns, from increased honey production to the cosmetic industry’s desire for the African royal jelly, preempt any safety concerns for public health. The film does have a wonderful sense of irony, perhaps unintentionally: Dr. Miller’s widow (also a Dr. Miller) smuggles the bees into the United States herself, for scientific purposes only, but hidden in her cosmetic bag. Another concern reflected in the film’s depiction of the bees’ initial release in Brazil is a government official in the Department of Agriculture who is personally siphoning off funding from the killer bee project, which makes the acquisition of the proper equipment impossible. The film seems to argue that if the government were not quite so corrupt, Dr. Miller would have had the equipment necessary to prevent the

poor beekeeper from accidentally releasing the bees. Zacharias's film, then, classifies the killer bee narrative as business and professional legends (the smuggling of the bees into the United States) and legends about governments (that ecological disaster occurs from government greed) (cf. Brunvand 1984, 1986, 1989) or perhaps as a synthesis of the two motifs into a more complicated narrative. The film also has a third legend motif, treated incidentally: Dr. Miller (the widow) is mugged while in a New York City elevator. The potential thieves open her makeup case and are stung to death by the hidden bees, introducing a sense of the "Crime Legends" (cf. Wachs 1988) category to the fold. *The Bees* reflects a variety of anxieties of post-Watergate America: that big businesses operate outside the law and are creating health risks for the public; that government officials are often corrupt and pilfer funding, resulting in ecological disasters because of insufficient equipment; and even the anxiety about urban living and crime.

The Swarm, however, reflects a different series of anxieties. The main legend classification type that the film reflects is Brunvand's "Business, Professional and Government Legends" (cf. Brunvand 1989), specifically a subgroup that can be identified as "Military Legends." The central action of the film is the battle between the American military and the legions of bees that are making their way across Texas. Most of the film takes place at a nuclear missile silo, which is where the bees first attacked. Throughout the film, the word *war* is used concerning the attempts to deal with the bees; in fact, *militarism* is the worldview that dominates the entire discourse of the film. This is almost the same discourse that dominates Laflin's novel *The Bees*, which likewise deals with the military's attempts to stop the advancing bees in Central America. In both cases, the contemporary anxiety of Americans regarding their military losses in Vietnam never seems too far away. Implicit in these narratives is the idea that the United States needs a military victory to counter their defeat in Southeast Asia. Seen racially, the bees could even be seen to represent the Vietcong themselves—the bees' yellow and black markings representing both the racial stereotyping of East Asians as having "yellow" skin color and the black of the Vietcong uniforms. These military victories over the bees can therefore be seen as symbolic victories against a Vietnamese that the American military machine could not defeat in reality.

The bees of *The Swarm* are no respecters of middle American values, either—furthering the symbolic equation between the bees and the Vietnamese. Applying William Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore" to this film reveals the underlying anxiety of this narrative. Ostensibly, *The Swarm* is an action-adventure movie with a huge Hollywood cast that is intended to be "just entertainment," but whenever "just entertainment" is presented before

us, ideological analysis needs to be done to assess the deeper play involved, which the other three functions begin to reveal. *The Swarm* seeks to validate conservative American culture by presenting an ideological position that the reality of the military is for the sole purpose of protecting American citizens from invading foreign armies that have no respect for the American way of life, as exemplified by the Maryville Flower festival or characters like schoolmarm Olivia de Havilland and Mayor Fred McMurray and that the controversy over the military's actions in Vietnam was an anomaly (see Bascom 1965, 292). *The Swarm* seems to posit that the military's “real” role as an institution is to protect the continental United States from killer bees, although the actual rhetoric the film uses reflects a different fear that I discuss momentarily. The use of such a contemporary threat as the killer bee to justify the military's existence also has some pretense at “educating” the American public on the nature of these insects (Bascom 1965, 293). Unfortunately, the film continues to feed the hysteria over threats by a good deal of “misinformation,” specifically regarding the venom the Brazilian bee's sting delivers. The killer bees in *The Swarm* can deliver “venom deadlier than anything we've known”—three stings from these killer bees can be fatal. As far as this belief narrative is concerned, the final of Bascom's four functions of folklore, “maintaining conformity” (1965, 294–95), functions as a synthesis of the other three functions: do not criticize the military, the film posits, for it exists to protect you from invaders, and there is one such invader currently on its way to your hometown, and without the army, you will die. Apparently, director Irwin Allen misjudged the “approved norms” of the “group,” for the film died a miserable death at the box office in 1978 and won the dubious honor of being considered by Michael and Harry Medved (1980) in their *Golden Turkey Awards* one of the worst films ever made (153).

One final topic needs to be discussed concerning *The Swarm* and its reflection of contemporary anxieties. I have already discussed how the killer bees in *The Swarm* may be symbolic of the Vietnamese, who defeated the United States in the 1970s. But beyond this level of signification, there is yet another racial and racist subtext to the film: I said that the Brazilian bee (the killer bee) is the hybrid of the European honeybee and the African honeybee and that another equally appropriate name for this insect is the “Africanized” bee. Unfortunately, Stirling Silliphant's screenplay for *The Swarm* does not quite get the reference accurate, and the resulting errors reflect an anxiety less about the threat from the bees than about African Americans in the United States. Perhaps we could restate this battle as the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) versus the bees. On at least two occasions, characters in the film make the following reference: “by tomorrow, there'll be no

more Africans.” Another moment refers to the “war against the Africans.” This rhetorical slippage is further aggravated by the fact that the only African American I could spot in the film was a single background artist in a crowd scene; certainly not one African American actor was given a speaking role, denying a voice to an entire race—a race who is rhetorically confused throughout the film with the killer bees themselves. Unfortunately, the racial aspect of *The Swarm* is not an isolated incident. Mark Winston’s otherwise excellent book contains a comparative diagram; a white figure represents the European bee, and a black figure represents the Africanized bee, although there is little difference in the actual appearance of the two bees. What this analysis leads toward is the identification of the racial associations of the killer bee anxiety.²

The belief narratives display an explicit fear of a foreign invasion, explained most directly by one of my interviewed informants in St. John’s who made the comment that whenever she thinks about the killer bees entering the United States, she imagines “wetback bees” trying to cross the Mexican–U.S. border illegally (personal interview). Thus, the killer bee narratives also seem to suggest a profound fear of unwelcome immigration from Latin America.

How have these narratives changed in the perception of the anxiety toward killer bees almost twenty years later? I have shown that there is still a great deal of misinformation regarding the real threat posed by the Brazilian honeybee in the public perception, but how has this focus changed in the cinematic treatment of the bees? *Deadly Invasion* is really a streamlined “Animal” or “Contamination” narrative, although there is hint of a generic horror tale because the bees lay siege to a house in the final half of the film. I believe this focus is significant: both *The Bees* and *The Swarm* use the invasion of killer bees to decimate society and create a panic about their impending arrival. *Deadly Invasion*, on the other hand, cannot posit that the bees are going to destroy the American way of life when they arrive because they have already arrived in the southern United States and have not destroyed civilization as we know it. Those fears of Latin American immigration and implied racist discourses are not present in the later film. What is under attack in *Deadly Invasion* is not the United States by a foreign army of insects but the family. The Ingram family has moved to a quiet rural California town that has a killer bee problem. Although, we are told, the bees will not bother human beings unless their hives are disturbed first, kids, being kids, disrupt an Africanized hive. The angry bees then attack the local boys, who run and take cover in the Ingram farmhouse. In fact, the structure of *Deadly Invasion* is closer to an urban legend structure than the other films are. In *Deadly Invasion*, Alan Dundes’s “Interdiction-Violation-Consequence-Attempted Escape” morphology (quoted in Barnes 1996, 4)

plugs easily into an analysis of this film. The “interdiction” follows the moment that we discover the bees in the American idyll of Blossom Meadow, California, by the placing of killer bee traps. The local beekeeper delivers the interdiction: “You have to give them [the bees] a reason to sting you. If you’re comfortable with the bees, they’ll be comfortable with you.” As Barnes (1996) noted, “The Interdiction phase in such campus horror legends is most often only implicit, doubtless because of its strong didactic force for tellers and listeners” (4). The *violation* of the interdiction is young Tom stupidly blasting the Africanized hives with a shotgun, and the *consequences* are that the bees attack, in this case the nearest point, the house that the hero, his family, and young Tom are holed up in. The bees lay siege to the house, forcing the family to initiate the final aspect of the pattern, attempted escape. Eighty-five minutes later (plus time for the commercials), the film ends.³

As Barnes (1996) noted, it is the denouement in urban legend that is vital to an understanding of the culture that produces it:

What is true for this text is true for thousands of such texts: as it makes clear, the climactic moment in the urban legend may be defined effectively as the moment when the listener discovers the presence of hidden plot functions, functions that have been deliberately suppressed and withheld for reasons which are ultimately formal and generic. In other words, legend plots, like mystery plots, are often *elliptical*. (5)

Although it is implicit in Barnes’s article, we need to contextualize the climax in urban legends as reflecting the culture in which the narratives are presented. Here, the suppressed function becomes explicit in the documentary appended to the film: that killer bees are not the invading armies of Genghis Khan, laying waste to everything in their path, but that with the proper knowledge and information, which the filmmakers have seen fit to supply (an ideological position to be sure), one can escape a killer bee attack and even prevent further ones. This is not just a question of the change in times increasing the available materials about the bees as much as it is that those belief narratives, even those that purport themselves as “fictionalized truth,” can be told that are based on a reasonable amount of factual material (*Deadly Invasion*’s opening statement: “the following could be a true story”). Cinema, as Victor Turner (1984) noted, is subjunctive:

Most cultural performances belong to culture’s “subjunctive” mood. “Subjunctive” is defined by Webster as “that mod of a verb to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc., rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of *were*, in ‘if I *were* you.’” (20–21)

Ritual, carnival, festival, theater, film, and similar performative genres clearly possess many of these attributes. Thus, cinema, like legend, is a negotiation of the possible while fully recognizing the self-reflexive nature of its medium. Legends, particularly legends *in film*, are a negotiation of the possible (Lindahla 1996a; Oring 1986) in the subjunctive mood (Turner 1984).

Finally, it appears that *Deadly Invasion* has not had that great an impact on the popular perceptions of the threat from killer bees. None of the informants I either spoke with or communicated with via e-mail watched the 1995 movie, possibly because of the memory of the poor quality of the killer bee movies of the late 1970s.

Conclusion

Ironically, as way of a conclusion, although *Deadly Invasion* remains the only “killer bee” movie to be produced in the past decade, the late 1990s saw a Hollywood revival of the “disaster genre.” The disaster cycle of movies in the 1970s—from *The Poseidon Adventure* (Irwin Allen and Ronald Neame 1972) to *Airport '79—The Concord* (David Lowell Rich 1979)—includes the original “killer bee” movies.⁴ The 1990s experienced a kind of cinematic revival of the genre, but as we saw with *Deadly Invasion*, the contemporary anxieties the films reflect are very different. The 1970s disaster films focused on how a natural disaster affects society or a representation of that society through a cross-section of characters, while the 1990s disaster movies focus more on “the family,” exploring how these natural disasters affect a specific family or ersatz family. Maurice Yacowar, back in 1977, wrote one of the few scholarly pieces on the genre. Although his taxonomic schema is too broad for what makes up a disaster movie (I would limit classification to the first two of his eight “Basic Types”: “The Natural Attack” and “The Ship of Fools”), it is a useful schema. Most of the disaster movies from the 1970s and their revival in the 1990s fall into “The Natural Attack” category.⁵ Yacowar (1995) further divides the “Natural Attack” category into two subgroups, “attack . . . by natural monsters” (either real or fantasy) and “attack by the elements” (262). Movies like the “killer bee” flicks and more recent films like *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich 1996) fall into the “natural monster” category, whereas *The Towering Inferno* (Irwin Allen and John Guillerman 1974), *The Poseidon Adventure*, and *Earthquake* (Mark Robson 1974) and 1997’s *Dante’s Peak* (Roger Donaldson) and *Volcano* (Mick Jackson) are “attack by the elements” type movies. Although the anxiety of the disaster film, specifically the “natural monster” type with “its conception of human beings as isolated

and helpless against the dangers of the world” (Yacowar 1995, 271), has remained conservative, we see a dynamic aspect emerge in the genre’s recent revival regarding the hero’s motivations.⁶ In *Deadly Invasion*, the primary motivation for Ingram is to protect his family from the bees. This is different from the 1970s disaster films, specifically the killer bee movies, in that the primary motivations were for self-preservation rather than societal preservation. The family again is the locus for primary motivation in *Dante’s Peak* and *Volcano* and in *Independence Day* and *Daylight* (Rob Cohen 1996); the latter is especially noteworthy for Sylvester Stallone’s own son, Sage, having a supporting role alongside his famous father. This locus on the family is different from the 1970s manifestation of the genre, which Yacowar (1995) characterizes as “that people must be united against calamity, that personal or social differences pale beside the assaulting forces in nature” (271).

In conclusion, then, not only do the killer bee movies of the 1970s and 1995 reflect the contemporary anxieties of the culture that produces them, but they feed the legend conduit at the vernacular level, influencing the very real fears that people have about this insect. Perhaps most intriguing for me, these films, when approached as modern belief narratives, display what Barre Toelken (1979) has called conservatism and dynamism across at least two generations. Despite being products of so-called *mass* culture or *mass* media, some popular film genres, particularly these killer bee movies, reflect contemporary anxieties much as urban legends do. They also demonstrate dynamism and conservatism.

Notes

1. Queen bees are slightly larger than worker bees, and in order to keep the hive in one place, the queen bee must remain in the hive. The “queen excluder” is a small doorway that enables the worker bees to leave (to collect pollen) but prevents the queen from leaving.

2. In related research, see Cynthia Erb’s (1998) book-length study on *King Kong*, who likewise racializes nonanthropomorphic representations.

3. One report in the *Fortean Times* states that the killer bees “take half an hour to calm down again, unlike the four minutes for their European cousins” (*Fortean Times* 1992, 17). If the siege sequence is shot in real time (that film time equals action time), then *Deadly Invasion* is further accurate in its representation of the killer bee threat, for the siege sequence only takes about twenty-five minutes of screen time.

4. Stirling Silliphant, the screenwriter of *The Swarm*, also wrote *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno*, two of the biggest disaster movies made (in terms of both budget and box office). Irwin Allen, the director of *The Swarm*, also directed

The Poseidon Adventure; its sequel, *Beyond the Poseidon Adventure* (1979); and *The Towering Inferno*.

5. I cite “The Ship of Fools” category to suggest a differentiation between most of these films and the *Airport*-type movies.

6. Gone are the huge casts, in keeping with contemporary Hollywood practice, in favor of one or two leads and a huge supporting cast. In 1970s disaster films, according to Yacowar (1995), “the entire cross section of society is under threat, even the world, instead of a situation of individual danger and fate. . . . Often the stars depend upon their familiarity from previous films, rather than developing a new characterization. Plot more than character is emphasized, suspense more than character development” (268–69). This was a dimension that *Independence Day* director Roland Emmerich attempted to revive as well: “We like the structure of those films [1970s disaster films] because they keep you guessing; you never know who is going to survive. . . . When you have a movie with a big action star, you know his or her character will triumph. In our movie, everybody’s fate is up in the air. Audiences will definitely be surprised as to who survives—and who doesn’t” (*Independence Day* 1996, n.p.). Emmerich is not quite honest here: once the primary alien attack is over, pretty much anyone who is going to die is already dead, and although some major stars appear in supporting roles, the two heroes of the film are clearly Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum, based on the screen time that Emmerich spends on these characters and the development of their stories.

PART FOUR

URBAN LEGENDS AND FILM

CHAPTER SEVEN



Studying the Urban Legend Film

Urban legends, those apocryphal stories told in university dormitories and around campfires about hook-handed psycho-killers and boyfriends discovered hanging above the parked cars, are a form of oral literature. In the next chapter, I explore how many urban legends were adapted into several well-known “slasher” films in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, before we get to that point, I need to take a step backward and explore the adaptive processes these largely formless narratives (Georges 1971, 18) have undergone to be made into mainstream cinematic horror narratives. I am expanding on Paul Smith’s (1999) typology by considering some of the structural issues of the urban legend film—that is, films based primarily or largely on orally circulated belief narratives. Much of *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends* focuses primarily on an individual legend or cycle of legends and how they are manifested in popular cinema and television and explore how these films operate as cultural discourse: how popular cinema reflects and transmits popular belief traditions. I want to do something different here, in, more or less, the middle of the book, in order to define some of the more textual dimensions to the urban legend horror film, to expand on what Smith began, and to create a schema for the later chapters as well as for further research from other scholars.

Two 1990s films generated much debate among legend scholars, for obvious reasons: *Urban Legend* (Jamie Banks 1998) and *Candyman* (Bernard Rose 1992). Both films utilize urban legend materials as a central aspect of their narrative.¹ I discuss *Candyman* in more detail in chapter 9. Overall, however,

a useful schema for the analysis of legends in popular cinema has been slow to develop.

An obvious starting point would be a consideration of the narrative structure of those films either based on or utilizing urban legends. Although Paul Smith and Sandy Hobbs's work (1990) is useful, they did not distinguish between films that *include* individual legend motifs and those films that are *based* on urban legends. Of the twenty-nine films they surveyed, seventeen (59 percent) are fully based on legends, while twelve (41 percent) use legend motifs within their narrative. Later, Smith (1999) further broke this category down, dividing his "Group C: Fiction [films]" into five subcategories: "asides," "embedded narratives," "sub-plots," "multiple plots," and "complete plots" (140–45). For Smith, this aspect of his typology is based largely on how important the legend is to the overall narrative. And it is this aspect of his typology that is most problematic, as it is not sufficiently descriptive of *how* the legend is being used in popular cinema. As it stands, Smith's typology becomes increasingly unsatisfactory with regard to his first three subcategories: "asides," "embedded narratives," and "sub-plots." At first the distinction is quite clear: namely, "sub-plots" are where "[urban] legends are used as an integral part of the film's sub-plot" (Smith 1999, 141), whereas "asides" and "embedded narratives" "usually . . . do not contribute to furthering the overall plot of the film" (140). There is some confusion regarding the difference between what Smith identifies as "embedded narratives" and "asides." The former is relatively clear; as the author noted, "I have used this term to cover those scenarios where a character in a film relates a . . . legend—much as someone would in ordinary conversation" (141). In this sense, Smith referred to legend texts that are *embedded* into the narrative's dialogue. However, Smith was less clear about "asides": "these are sometimes *textual*, but can also be *visual*" (140). What remains unclear is if Smith identified a *textual* legend reference (that is, a nonsubstantive aspect of the narrative) when is it an aside and not an embedded narrative.

While the "embedded narratives" subcategory is useful, Smith's distinction between "asides" and "sub-plots" is too ambiguous. As noted, 41 percent of the films Smith and Hobbs cited use legend motifs within their diegesis: that is, within the filmic narrative, urban legends are either told or demonstrated but are not necessarily substantive to the overall film/story. Some of their examples (significantly, none of them horror films), like *Bliss* (Ray Lawrence, 1985), which features a circus elephant sitting on the protagonist's car after mistaking it for its stool in performance (Smith and Hobbs 1990), or *Superman III* (Richard Lester 1983), where "a computer operator rounds down the odd cents in customers' accounts and transfers the 'loose change'

to his own account” (Smith and Hobbs 1990, 142), use a kind of ostensive demonstration of legend texts to “flesh out” their filmic narratives. Other examples the authors cited include feature films wherein diegetic characters relate orally the legend texts: for example, in *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn 1975), the “Alligators in the Sewers” legend is *told* to private detective Harry Moseby (Gene Hackman) (Smith and Hobbs 1990, 142).

Within Smith’s typology, *Superman III* would be an “aside,” *Night Moves* would be an “embedded narrative,” and *Bliss* would be a “sub-plot.” All three examples embed their legend texts within an overall narrative structure, but the difference in legend *performance*—that is, whether the legend is told or ostensibly demonstrated—is rarely taken into consideration. We should, therefore, within the larger narrative category of Smith’s “Group C” films, distinguish between *ostensive* and *dialogic* legend motifs: those legends presented (as action) and represented (as dialogue).

The vast majority of films Smith and Hobbs identified as using urban legend motifs *within their diegesis* use ostensive motifs—that is, rather than represent the legend narrative orally, these films present the legend *in situ*. Whether we are dealing with a presentation of “The Driver’s Revenge” in *Smokey and the Bandit* (Hal Needham 1977) (Smith and Hobbs 1990, 142) or “The Pet in the Microwave” motif in *Gremlins* (Joe Dante 1984) (Smith and Hobbs 1990, 145), these urban legends appear incidentally in the film *as action*, not orally.

The other kind of incidental legend manifestation in film is orally represented—characters tell the urban legend to others in what I call *dialogic* motifs. More often than not, these occur in fictional contexts with great verisimilitude to actual legend transmission, and they take place in casual conversation or in sessions around a campfire. For example, in *Meatballs* (Ivan Reitman 1979), Tripper (Bill Murray) tells his junior counselors “The Hook” legend around a campfire. He concludes his narrative by noting that “some say he’s still around here. And I say . . . they’re *right!*” This final line is punctuated with Tripper revealing a hook for his hand, successfully scaring the other counselors. By playing with the conventions of legend storytelling and bringing the action to the here and now, this sequence in *Meatballs* demonstrates the slippage between dialogic and ostensive legend telling: what began as an oral representation of the narrative (complete with appropriate context) becomes playful presentation for the diegetic characters in the mock hook Tripper reveals at the end. This example demonstrates that ostensive and dialogic embedded narratives in film should not be seen as essentialist but often features slippage between the two. This sequence also demonstrates some further generic slippage: *Meatballs* is a comedy, not a horror film. In both legend telling and its cinematic equivalent,

the slippage between comedy and horror, like that between dialogic and ostensive legend telling, is often mutually dependent.

Therefore, any film that is not directly based on an urban legend text but that uses legendary materials within its diegesis (either as a substantive or a nonsubstantive aspect of its narrative) can be considered embedded narratives. However, within this subcategory of embedded narratives we must also distinguish between *ostensive* and *dialogic* embedded narratives.

Single-Strand Narratives

When it comes to films that are based on urban legends, Smith (1999) identified two categories: “multiple plot” and “complete plot” films (144–45). I have identified four main narrative strategies that filmmakers avail themselves to within Smith’s “complete plot” category: *extended*, *resultant*, *structuring*, and *fusion* narratives.

Those films that begin with a legend text and then extend the filmic narrative to explore the repercussions of the incident for the remainder of the film I have called *extended narratives*. In *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton 1979), the first twenty minutes of the film is a “basic dramatization” (Smith and Hobbs 1990, 139) of “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” legend. This is extended to explore the effects of this incident seven years later. The babysitter, Jill (Carol Kane), has now married and has a family of her own, but the “Man Upstairs,” Curt Duncan (Tony Beckley), is released from prison and desires to finish what he started with Jill. While the first twenty minutes of the film is a tense realization of the legend, in the attempt to extend this narrative for another seventy minutes, too much deviation from the original urban legend occurs. There are two possible reasons the extended narrative fails: One is that by extending the narrative “seven years later,” Jill is no longer a point of identification for the mostly adolescent audience. By becoming a housewife and mother, the character is too distant for the audience to relate to experientially. The other violation of the legend’s cultural logic is the film’s focus on the experiences of the newly released Duncan. Again, the (hypothetically) young audience cannot identify with the experiences of the killer: “François Truffaut claims that we identify with a character not when we look *with* the character, but when the character looks *at us*” (Bordwell and Thompson 1986, 197, emphasis added). We therefore do not identify with Curt Duncan when he is watching Jill babysit, but when Jill returns our gaze onscreen, we relate to her fear and predicament. By moving the narrative away from that point of identification, either by progressing Jill’s life beyond the audience’s level of experience or by focusing on the killer’s story, that

early identification is violated. While *When a Stranger Calls* could be considered an embedded narrative because only the first section of the film is concerned with representing the legend itself, the legend acts as a leitmotif throughout the entire film, particularly in Duncan's taunting phone calls with their chilling catchphrase asking if Jill "has checked the children."

A slightly more successful demonstration of this narrative strategy is the film *The Curve* (Dan Rosen 1998). Despite not being strictly speaking a horror film, it is a sufficiently dark thriller. *The Curve* begins with a voice-over telling us the legend of "The Suicide Rule"—if your roommate commits suicide, you get an automatic grade point average of 4.0 for that semester (a dialogic embedded narrative). Chris (Michael Vartan) is in his final semester, and his grades are falling. His roommate, Tim (Matthew Lillard), convinces him to utilize "The Suicide Rule," and together they plan to bump off their third roommate, Rand (Randall Batinkoff). This film extends its narrative to explore the effects this plan has on the students and develops into a dark "who-killed-who" thriller. But, unlike *When a Stranger Calls*, *The Curve* maintains its points of identification throughout, so the plot twists and reversals in the movie, although not based in legendry, still hold the audience's attention, interest, and potential identification.

Another strategy filmmakers employ gives us the lead-up to a legend story: *resultant narratives*. For example, in *The Harvest* (David Marconi 1993), Charlie Pope (Miguel Ferrer), a writer working on a "true-crime" type of film script, is suffering from both writer's block and pressure from his producers to keep the script exciting. Pope goes to Mexico, where the original murder occurred, and begins his own investigations. While there doing his research, Pope meets a woman in a bar, gets drunk, and, while walking with her on a beach, is knocked out by unknown assailants. Regaining consciousness, Pope discovers he is inside the "Organ Theft" legend. Thinking the woman was a decoy to lure him to the organ thieves, he tracks her down, and together they become involved in trying to stop an international black market organ trade. In *resultant narratives*, we get the behind-the-scenes story about the lead-up to the familiar legend. The actual legend acts almost as a punch line to the film. Ideally under this narrative strategy, we have identified with our protagonist(s) and so are more receptive to the horror of what happens to them once the legend aspects are revealed.

Another *resultant narrative* is *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie 1997). Based on the young adult novel of the same name, the overall story involves a pact between four newly graduated high school students who accidentally kill someone during a drunk-driving incident. They are sworn to secrecy, but a psycho-killer hunts them down, leaving the enigmatic message

“I know what you did last summer.” The killer—dressed in oilskins and carrying a longshoreman’s hook—suggests the urban legend of “The Hook.” Before the accident, Julie (Jennifer Love Hewitt), Helen (Sarah Michelle Gellar), Barry (Ryan Phillippe), and Ray (Freddie Prinze Jr.) sit around a campfire, telling “The Hook” legend. Here the storytelling context is presented along with the representation of the legend itself (again an example of a dialogic embedded narrative). But there is disagreement among the characters over how the actual story runs—“The Hook” story gets confused with variants of “The Boyfriend’s Death.” The conclusion of the sequence, Ray’s comments that, although “folklore,” these stories are based somehow in truth, sets up the urban legend matrix: the hook-carrying killer that will stalk Julie and her friends the following year becomes the hook-handed killer in the oral tradition. In an intriguing hypothesis, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* acts as *precognitive resultant narrative*—the film is primarily about the lead-in to “The Hook” story (resultant narrative), but this resultant narrative structure is set up a year previous to the film’s main action. Interestingly, Lois Duncan’s original novel is a straightforward murder mystery that omits this urban legend aspect (added into the film by screenwriter Kevin Williamson).

A third narrative strategy uses the urban legend as a *structuring outline* and develops its diegesis from within. In the black comedy *Dead Man on Campus* (Alan Cohn 1998), Josh Miller (Tom Everett Scott) is a scholarship student who needs to maintain a high grade point average in order to keep his funding. Unfortunately, he ends up rooming with wild-man Cooper “Coop” Fredrickson (Mark-Paul Gosselaar). Introduced to sex, drugs, and rock and roll, Josh watches his marks plummet. Enter again the urban legend of “The Suicide Rule.” Josh and Coop scheme to find the most psychologically unbalanced roommate they can and push him over the edge. As Coop says within the movie, “They’re probably going to commit suicide anyway. Why not have their death actually benefit someone.” With that outline, *Dead Man on Campus* takes the legend and structures an *Animal House*-type black comedy as these two students try to find the perfect roommate for their purposes. On the level of potential audience identification, the pressures of academic achievement and the seemingly ad hoc administration of university dormitories—of being forced to get along with complete strangers in a living situation—get reflected in “The Suicide Rule” legend and in films like *The Curve* and *Dead Man on Campus*. In particular, the latter film, as a “gross-out” comedy, puts a different emphasis on the legend—we still have similar college-aged fears going on, but by laughing at them, the wish-fulfillment quality comes to the fore: to live as irresponsibly as possible without any reprisals in terms of grades or expulsion. But the profound impact of adolescent sui-

cide is dealt with by not putting those characters established as points of identification (here Josh and Coop) in positions of mortal danger (unlike in *The Curve*). The boys' potential victims are established as "spectacles": Cliff (Lochlyn Munro), the alcoholic and psychotic jock; Buckley (Randy Pearlstein), the paranoid conspiracy theorist; and Matt (Corey Page), the faux-British musical nihilist. The one "real" suicide attempt within the diegesis, the boys' genuinely neurotic neighbor Pickle (Aeryk Egan), is treated with sensitivity and respect.

Finally, *fusion narratives* are filmic narratives that fuse two different urban legends together. In *Alligator* (Lewis Teague 1980), the film starts off as the "Alligators in the Sewers" legend, but in order to explain how the alligators in question became mutated—in addition to light deprivation and changes in food—this filmic narrative also introduces another legend narrative about pets abducted for medical experimentation. Specifically, for this film's diegesis, these pets are genetically experimented upon, and the resulting carcasses are thrown into the sewers where the flushed alligator feeds. Eventually this movie becomes a *Jaws*-like, man-versus-animal movie—but what keeps it from being an extended narrative is the "Alligator in the Sewers" legend fused with the legend about "Pet Abductions for Medical Experiments."

Multiple-Strand Narratives

Urban legends are characteristically short: that is, unlike fairy tales, legends often take less time to tell and feature less complicated plots. The variety of "single-strand" filmic narrative strategies demonstrates some of the ways in which filmmakers have attempted to expand, or extend, legend narratives. However, regardless of narrative technique, most legends cannot sustain a full-length movie. Other narrative techniques are required to transform legends into film: in particular, using several legend texts in the same movie—or what I am calling "multiple-strand" narratives.

Urban Legend is the most obvious example of *multiple fusion narratives*—films that fuse together a number of legend texts (through either ostension or dialogue). In the movie, undergraduate student Natalie (Alicia Witt) is terrorized by a psycho-killer using urban legends as *modus operandi*—that is, the film uses *ostensive embedded narratives* as a murder device in a horror film.

But beyond that aspect of *Urban Legend*, the film also features some more benign forms of ostensive embedded narratives. For example, Natalie and her friend Brenda (Rebecca Gayhart) attempt a variation on the "Bloody Mary" ritual at the now boarded-up entrance to Stanley Hall, the site of a student massacre twenty-five years earlier. Likewise, we see Professor Wexler

(Robert England) tell the story about Mikey from the Life brand cereal commercial having died from consuming Pop Rocks with Coke to demonstrate the “fallaciousness” of these stories to his folklore class. Both of these examples, while a form of ostensive legend presentation, are benign in the sense that no one is actually hurt.

Urban legends are also presented in the movie as more serious ostensive embedded narratives: the whole premise of the film is that a killer is enacting these legends “for real.” The movie begins with Michelle Mancini (Natasha Gregson Wagner) being killed in an enactment of the legend of “The Killer in the Backseat.” Damon Brooks (Joshua Jackson) is killed using the scenario of “The Boyfriend’s Death,” and Natalie’s roommate, Tosh (Danielle Harris), is murdered in a presentation of the “Aren’t You Glad You Didn’t Turn On the Light” story. Sasha (Tara Reid), the campus “shock-jock” radio personality, is murdered on-air and, while perhaps not based on a specific legend itself, echoes the stories about “snuff” movies, or deaths recorded on-air. Even Natalie is nearly a victim of ostension as the killer attempts to steal one of her kidneys.

Professor Wexler is murdered off-camera, but his body is discovered in the trunk of a car by the smell of his decomposing corpse. Is this an intentional echo of “The Death Car” legend? And although Parker (Michael Rosenbaum) is actually killed by the forced ingestion of drain cleaner (to my knowledge not a legend), this murder is preceded by his dog maliciously exploding in a microwave. The killer’s motive is also based on an urban legend: Brenda’s fiancé was killed in a car accident resulting from Natalie and Michelle’s enacting the “Car-Lights Initiation” legend, and she is now avenging her own boyfriend’s death. In all these examples, ostension is used, diegetically, to murder people—Brenda is taking the legends and making them real.

There is a more complex level of ostension operating in *Urban Legend* at the level of the filmmakers’ self-reflexivity: from a semiotic perspective—and ostension is primarily semiotic (as I discuss in chapters 9 and 10)—the actors in the film are left at the level of signifier to their other, extratextual identities. For example, Joshua Jackson is known primarily for his role in the television series *Dawson’s Creek*, created by Kevin Williamson, who also wrote the legend-based film *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Scream*. This self-awareness is textually indicated in the film as Damon is attempting to make out with Natalie and puts on the radio. When Paula Cole’s “I Don’t Want to Wait,” the theme tune to *Dawson’s Creek*, starts playing, Damon turns it off with disgust. This level of ostension appeals to the *Dawson’s Creek* audience, those cinemagoers whose experience of horror movies begins with

Scream (Wes Craven 1996). But furthermore, Danielle Harris (“Tosh”) is known primarily as the star of both *Halloween 4* (Dwight Little 1988) and *Halloween 5* (Dominique Othenin-Girard 1989), at least within the horror-fan community—that is, another audience likely to see *Urban Legend* and likely to know about *Halloween 4* and 5. If this example is a tad esoteric, Robert Englund (“Professor Wexler”) is quite a celebrity within this fan community as the man who also played Freddie Kreuger in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. So, while the casting of Harris and Englund appeal potentially to one kind of fan audience for this particular film (the horror audience), the casting of Jackson and the “in-joke” about the Paula Cole song appeals to another kind of fan audience (the teen audience). If, as Linda Dégh (1995) seems to indicate, ostension can run the gamut from murdering one’s university colleagues, like Brenda does in legendlike scenarios, to the wearing of legend-referent Halloween costumes, then, as I argue in chapter 9, *mass-mediated* ostension, as the game played by, among others, movie audiences participating in a film, can also run a similar gamut that includes the recognition of this self-reflexive game of semiotic referencing.

Yet, beyond these explicitly ostensive methods of representing legends, *Urban Legend* also features incidents of dialogic embedded narratives. In particular, two characters are the focus of these legend tellings: Sasha, who, as a regular section of her seemingly endless radio show, has her listeners phone in. It is these listeners who related the legend texts. Interestingly, these stories, although they are represented to us as dialogic embedded narratives, within the diegetic world of *Urban Legend*, are off-screen ostensive embedded narratives: her callers have actually replaced a roommate’s birth-control pills with baby aspirin, have been the “promiscuous cheerleader,” and have phoned in while stuck in a new sexual position.

The other focus for dialogic embedded narratives within the film is the character Parker, who relates the “University Cover-up of Campus Murder,” the “Spider Eggs in Bubble Yum,” the “Richard Gere and the Gerbil,” and the “Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” stories. In all these cases, Parker tells these stories with great pleasure, both debunking the belief in them and just relishing a good and grisly tale. The positioning of Parker as debunker also parallels him with Professor Wexler, who not only retells the “Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” story as part of his folklore lecture but is equally concerned with debunking “wrong beliefs.”

Clearly, the film is intended to appeal to college students, as it reflects their experiences and social fears. However, *Urban Legend* seems to have two social anxiety themes, both of which reflect that experiential dimension of college life: one is the fear of strangers at a university, of feeling alone and

not knowing anyone, even your would-be killer. The other is more implicit. Brenda's motivation for killing her classmates is a direct consequence of her fiancé's death resulting from Natalie and Michelle's playing around with the "Car-Lights Initiation" legend. The film seems to be warning young people, the movie and genre's chief demographic, that even seemingly benign forms of ostension, of just playing around *without* murderous intent, can be deadly.

Candyman is another film that fuses a number of legends into a similar construct, and while I discuss Bernard Rose's film in more detail in chapter 9, some preliminary discussion is relevant here. We hear about "The Hippy Babysitter" who cooks the child and puts the chicken to bed as well as the "Alligators in the Sewers" story (dialogic embedded narratives). We are offered visually images intended to echo with the "Razor Blades Found in Halloween Candy," the "Child Emasculated in the Public Washroom," and even the historical legend of "Gelert," where the blood from a faithful dog is mistaken for the blood of a baby (ostensive embedded narratives). Candyman's (Tony Todd) body is also a small compendium of legend texts: he has a hook for a hand ("The Hook"), his body is a beehive (an echo of the stories about "Killer Bees"—see chapter 6), and he is summoned by the "Bloody Mary" ritual (all of which can also be considered ostensive embedded narratives).

Another narrative strategy filmmakers sometimes avail themselves to in conveying a variety of urban legend texts is the *anthology film*. Anthology films are films that, rather than trying to fuse a number of narratives together, anthologize them, usually with some kind of framing device. This technique recognizes the short-story quality of urban legends and, rather than expanding or extending the narratives, treats each story as distinct. For example, Smith and Hobbs (1990) identified the first story in *Nightmares* (Joseph Sargent 1983), "Terror in Topanga," as "The Killer in the Backseat" legend (142). Examples like Sargent's film use urban legends only for single sections of their anthology.

However, there is at least one anthology film that draws heavily on urban legendry, *Campfire Tales* (Matt Cooper, Martin Kunert, and David Semel 1997). *Campfire Tales* is noteworthy in part for its narrative structure: not only does it follow the basic anthology structure—four teens are stranded in the woods after a car accident, they build a campfire, and they tell the legends that are then presented dramatically—but this framing narrative is prefaced and epilogued by another legendary presentation.

The movie opens in monochrome, even before the opening credits sequence, with a three-and-a-half-minute representation of "The Hook." The time period seems to be the late 1950s/early 1960s, reflecting the time period

when this story was first recognized as circulating. The climax of the story, where our hero, Eddie (James Marsden), discovers the dismembered hook hanging from Jenny's (Amy Smart) side of the car, is punctuated musically by a *Psycho*-like chord of strings as the camera pans up the car door, revealing the hook stuck in the doorjamb. This shot is followed by two quick successive close-ups moving ever tighter on the hook itself, before cutting to black for the opening credits sequence, where we hear our framing narrative characters, Cliff (Jay R. Ferguson), Eric (Christopher Masterson), Alex (Kim Murphy), and Lauren (Christine Taylor), debate the "probability" of that story's veracity, creating verisimilitude with ethnographically documented legend-telling sessions (Oring 1986, 125).

Returning from a rock concert, the four teen storytellers are involved in a car accident on a deserted stretch of road. While waiting for assistance, they build a campfire and tell scary stories. These narratives are then dramatized for the cinematic audience (dialogic becoming ostensive embedded narrative). The first of these narratives, titled "The Honeymoon," is, for the most part, a werewolf story. Rick (Ron Livingston) and Valerie (Jennifer MacDonald) are driving west for their honeymoon. They run out of gas on a deserted stretch of highway but are warned to stay in their vehicle until sunrise by a spooky local (Hawthorne James). They are told that something is hunting them in the darkness and that they will be relatively safe inside. Rick dismisses this warning and heads out to find a gas station on his own, leaving Valerie to fend for herself in the trailer. Although werewolves are "legendary" in the broadest sense of the word, they do not often appear in *urban* legends, which seem to favor more human monsters.

However, the climax of this short narrative brings "The Honeymoon" back into urban legendry. The werewolves eviscerate Rick on his search for gas, and the monsters then attack the caravan. Valerie successfully holds off the monster assault until morning, when she is awakened by a hesitant knock on the camper door. A police officer tells her to step out of the vehicle and not to look back—a verbal signifier that cues us to the urban legend presented, "The Boyfriend's Death." Here is perhaps the best example of what I referred to as a resultant narrative: we experience the flow of the filmic narrative, assuming it to be one thing or at least taking us in one direction (here, as a werewolf story), only to reveal its legend at the end of the sequence.

The second narrative told/dramatized is what I referred to as a fusion narrative. Titled, by the screenwriters, "People Can Lick Too," this sequence ends in that particular legend (i.e., the sequence is also a resultant narrative). However, in order to get to the legendary denouement of the story, we begin

with a variant of the legend that Barbara Mikkelson (2002) calls “Shannon’s Friend.” Here, a twelve-year-old girl gives out personal information to her online “friend,” who she believes to be another child but is actually an Internet predator, thereby fusing two different urban legends much in the same way as did *Alligator*.

The third story presented in the film, titled “The Locket,” is a romantic ghost story about a young motorcyclist (Glenn Quinn) who, having engine trouble, stops at an isolated house inhabited only by a beautiful but mute young woman (Jacinda Barrett). In the dead of night, they experience the paranormal reoccurrence of a horrendous murder. Although ghost stories are themselves legends—and there are many urban legends *about* ghosts—“The Locket” does not have a direct correlation with the oral tradition. It is, however, possibly a Mexican American variant on “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend, whereby instead of meeting the specter on the road hitchhiking, the human and the ghost meet at a party or a ball (Glazer 2002).

Likewise, although not a specific urban legend but using a broader definition of legendry as “belief narrative,” as I did in the previous chapter, the framing narrative about the four campfire storytelling teens concludes with the revelation that the four are dead after the car accident. The characters from the narratives they have been telling are actually the people around the crash site. The film’s end credits begin to roll, but after the director, screenwriter, and cast credits for each of the segments, we are given a single tracking shot, pulling away from the accident scene along the line of backed-up traffic. The final car we see is an old Thunderbird, and out of the car’s widow, resting on the window frame, is a prosthetic hook as the color drains from the shot returning to the monochrome cinematography we began the film with.

Conclusion

Smith’s revised typology, while a useful beginning, is clearly in need of further development. His typology of “Group C: Fiction” can be developed as suggested previously. This current development can be summarized thus:

- I. Embedded narratives
 - Dialogic
 - Ostensive
- II. Single-strand narratives
 - Extended narratives
 - Resultant narratives

- Structuring narratives
 - Fusion narratives
- III. Multistrand narratives
- Fusion narratives—often embedding both dialogic and ostensive narratives
 - Anthologies—that may use any of the techniques of single-strand or embedded narratives

That being said, this revised typology does not cover the entirety of Smith's schema: his "Group C" has two previous "groups" to contend with—"Nonfiction" (like ethnographic films, news, and documentaries) (Smith 1999, 138–39) and a combination category of "Nonfiction/Fiction" films (legends used in education or as propaganda) (Smith 1999, 146–52). I am dealing merely with the adaptation of these legends in the (predominantly) horror-film.

Yet, within the relatively large discourse of horror movie adaptations, urban legends appear relatively infrequently. This surprises me, as, first, these orally circulated stories are copyright free, and therefore horror film producers do not have to pay any rights for the stories, and, second, urban legends are good, gross, frightening, and suspenseful stories. And as I noted in discussing the motif index and the zombie film, the folk have been grossing each other out for centuries; horror movie producers should pay attention to that.

Note

1. And, interestingly, these films almost completely drop those points of folkloristic interest in their sequels: *Urban Legends: Final Cut* (John Ottman 2000), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Bill Condon 1995), and *Candyman: Day of the Dead* (Turi Meyer 1999). *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary* (Mary Lambert 2005) is nominally more folkloristic than *The Final Cut*.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The Slasher Film as Folkloristic Social Script

Mark Kermode begins his documentary film about the slasher genre, *Scream and Scream Again: A History of the Slasher Film* (Andrew Abbott and Russell Leven 2000), with a comparison between the slasher film and the urban legend known as “The Hook,” in which a psychotic killer with a hook for a hand menaces a young couple parked on Lovers’ Lane. According to Kermode, “The Hook” works as a morality archetype for the entire slasher phenomenon: the young couple are threatened specifically because they have strayed from the moral path (by engaging in sexual activity) but are ultimately saved from certain death because their adolescent sexuality did not get the better of them.¹

Within this documentary film and following Kermode’s introduction is a montage retelling of this legend by a variety of horror movie filmmakers, including Wes Craven, William Lustig, Sean Cunningham, John McNaughton, and Tobe Hooper; each filmmaker relates a sentence or two of the story. Kermode concludes this sequence by noting that “The Hook” had a direct influence on slasher films like *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978) when fused with previous films about psychotic killers like *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark 1974). But it is a single comment by Hooper, the director of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974), that got me thinking directly about the connection between the slasher film and urban legends.

Hooper notes that the enduring power of both these films and these legends is their “close call with death.” In many urban legends, as well as films, about psycho-killers, the protagonists survive; they met death (consciously or

unawares as in the case of “The Hook”) and lived to tell about it. That experience of surviving the maniac’s rampage is, in Vera Dika’s (1990) morphology of the slasher film, what she noted as the concluding structural facet, “the heroine is not free” (60). Surviving a slasher movie, just like surviving an urban legend, scars the narrative’s protagonists at the point of diegetic closure.

This chapter examines the narrative structure of the slasher film, with particular attention to its relation to urban legends. Although urban legends have directly inspired some slasher films, like *When a Stranger Calls* and *Urban Legend*, most utilize a narrative structure analogous to this kind of modern folklore. In addition, this study seeks to problematize both the legends’ and the films’ overtly content-derived taxonomies through a morphological consideration, including the issue of the film/story’s affect. As I have implied throughout these chapters, film scholars do not, apparently, read in folkloristics, for in none of the central works on the modern horror film (i.e., Clover 1992; Creed 1993; or especially Dika 1990) is there any reference to the literature on urban legends. Yet, by the same token, folklorists often have not read widely within film studies, and when they make reference to film versions of legend texts, they do so filmographically—that is, they note such references but do not analyze them to any degree, what I have been calling “motif spotting.” This chapter seeks to present a beginning point in redressing both of these shortcomings.

Defining the Slasher Movie

Defining the slasher genre is difficult: a number of film scholars have approached the subject, each with his or her own agenda, and what is included within such studies or, more important, what is excluded from consideration says more about the scholars’ own schemata than anything inherent in the films themselves (Bordwell 1989). Dika (1990), at the beginning of her own book-length study of the phenomenon, referred to these films as being a “large but undifferentiated body of films that emerged onto the American market in the late seventies and early eighties” (9). Carol Clover (1992), in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, saw the slasher film as merely one example of the phenomenon of the modern horror film. If we base our taxonomic criterion solely on content, then any film with or about a psychotic murderer would be considered a slasher film, a point voiced by Robin Wood (1984). Dika (1990) took issue with Wood on this account, noting that he

assembles his body of works on the assumption that these are “low-budget horror films based on psychotic killers.” Much like the grouping together of films

under the heading of violence, the conclusion that the presence of a single character can serve to isolate a distinctive formula is ultimately incorrect. (11)

On the other hand, John McCarty (1984) would classify the films under discussion here as “splatter movies”:

Splatter movies, offshoots of the horror film genre, aim not to scare their audience, necessarily, nor to drive them to the edges of their seats in suspense, but to *mortify* them with scenes of explicit gore. In splatter movies, mutilation is indeed the message—many times the only one. (1)

Dika (1990) disagreed with McCarty and saw instead “this horror formula [as] best identified by a predominantly *off-screen* killer who is known primarily by his/her distinctive point-of-view shots” (14, emphasis added). Based on this distinction, Dika classified these films as “stalker films,” with the emphasis on the watching of the victims before they are killed. I, personally, prefer the term *slasher* films, not because of any psychoanalytical or schematic a priori assumption about the films’ gender discourse (as in “slasher” films), but because as an adolescent filmgoer in early 1980s Toronto, this is what we called the films under consideration here. Nevertheless, there are varieties of different kinds of slasher films, and I outline these next.

One kind I refer to is “Scooby-Doo movies,” named after the children’s animated television series that deals with a gang of teenagers solving what appear to the adult, outside world as supernatural mysteries but are ultimately revealed to be nonsupernatural in nature and are usually the result of some adult who uses the supernatural legend to distract other people from discovering his or her own illegal operation.² In the “Scooby-Doo” slasher films, however, the killer is revealed to be human and using some kind of killer legend to distract from his or her own motives. These slasher films are, in reality, more like Italian *giallo* films, gory murder-mystery/horror hybrids (see Koven 2006), where the “game” for the audience is to attempt a hypothesis as to who the killer may be out of a set group of people. This *difference* in narrative structure has been noted before, for example, by Gregory Waller (1987) in his introduction to his edited volume *American Nightmares*, where he directs his readers

to consider the case of *Prom Night* (1980) and *Terror Train* (1980), which were unambiguously advertised as horror movies in the manner of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. Though they do feature psychopathic killers, both of these stalker films are structured very much like classical whodunits, complete with a plethora of mysterious clues and a cast of likely suspects. (10)

Dika (1990), although noting these differences in narrative structure, differed in her assessment of their generic similarity, noting that “the apparent shift in the stalker film formula, one that asks the question Who is the killer? instead of just Where is the killer? is ultimately a ‘trick’ imposed by the film’s authorial system: a superficial change that does not alter the film’s underlying structure” (90). This is not a “superficial change,” for what is *specifically* noteworthy and different about these films is that the killer is not always killing, and he or she must interact with the other characters in some kind of “normal” way at other times during the film. These are by far the most common form of the slasher film, and many of the “classics” of the genre are of this type: *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch 1980) and *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswood 1981) are perhaps two of the best-known films, and I consider *Terror Train* later. However, almost all the more recent revivals of the slasher film, *Scream 1, 2, and 3* (Wes Craven 1996, 1997, and 2000), *Urban Legend*, and *Cherry Falls* (Geoffrey Wright 2000), are also “Scooby-Doo” slasher films; space does not permit me to consider this narrative structure except in passing.

By far the *least* common form of the genre can be considered “Psycho Character Studies,” films that try to explore the psyche of a psychotic killer. Films in this category include *Fade to Black* (Vernon Zimmerman 1980), *Maniac* (William Lustig 1981), *Silent Night Deadly Night* (Charles E. Sellier Jr. 1984), and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton 1986). In these films, the killer and his illness and motivation are explored both psychologically and sociologically in an attempt to understand the cultural phenomenon of serial killers. This is not to say that these films do not utilize urban legend motifs; however, their consideration also falls outside the purview of this book.

The slasher films that I *do* want to consider here are those films in which the killer is known from the outset to both the filmic victims and to the audience, films where the killer, when met, is always the killer. Although these films are less common than the *giallo*-like slasher films, within the popular consciousness of genre aficionados they are perhaps the most famous: *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham 1980), *The Burning* (Tony Maylam 1981), and others. Because both the dramatis personae as well as the audience know the killer’s identity, these films are not driven by the same mystery elements that the “Scooby-Doo” films are. Likewise, because we are given little insight into these killers’ motivations or psyches, it is unlikely we can engage with the films on an emotional, *identification* level (at least with the killer), like one should in the “Psycho Character Study” films.

Instead, this category of slasher film reveals the subgenre's connection to urban legends, and by considering both these films' and the legends' structures, some new light is shed upon what drives the enjoyment from these films. It is worth noting, even somewhat parenthetically, one notable exclusion from this category of the slasher film: *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984). While much of the scholarly and popular material tends to include *Elm Street* and its monster, Freddy Krueger, in the slasher pantheon, I have difficulty including it in this subgenre because of its primarily supernatural killer—Freddy is a revenant, and a malicious one at that. Often *Elm Street* gets included because it is an early 1980s horror film, and those critics who include it as a slasher film tend to assume that all horror movies made in the early parts of the decade share deeper taxonomic meaning.³ The killers of all three kinds of slasher movies—*giallo* type, “psycho character studies,” or even those killers who appear in urban legends and its inspired films—are all primarily corporeal. Often a supernatural hypothesis is offered within the diegesis—for example, that Michael Myers in *Halloween* is “the Bogeyman”—but these explanations are always false. In different terms, this distinction between the supernatural horror worlds of Freddy Krueger and the “natural” horror worlds of Michael Myers and the other killers I am presenting here underlines Todorov's (2000) distinction between the fantastic—defined as “a world which is indeed our world, the one we know . . . [but wherein] occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (14) and his concept of the uncanny—wherein the narrative event “does not transcend the laws of nature as we know them” (16). The world of *Elm Street* is our world, to a some extent, but our laws of nature do not allow for supernatural presences like Freddy Krueger, whereas, although thankfully not a common occurrence, serial and psychotic killers do stalk our world. The world of *Elm Street*, within this Todorovian epistemology, would fall under his category of “the fantastic,” while the world of urban legends and the slasher films I am considering here are more akin to his “uncanny.”

Urban Legends

Before discussing how the slasher genre uses urban legends, some further definition is required; I say *some* definition because *urban legend*, in fact the term *legend* itself, is difficult to define. Folkloristics, for decades, has been struggling with a definitive understanding of the term. Because most legends referred to as *urban* rarely occur within an urban diegetic space (i.e., Lovers' Lane or remote highways), nor are they frequently told within urban performative contexts (i.e., around campfires), the term *urban* is understood as referring to

Western modernity (cf. Tangherlini 1990). But the one similar factor of both urban and more seemingly traditional legends is that they have to do with belief. This is to say, as Georges noted, not that all legends are believed, either by their tellers or by the audience (cf. Georges 1971), but that they negotiate the conceptual space of the possible, of what *could be true* (Oring 1986).

The term *urban legend* gained popular understanding through the work of folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand in the early 1980s, beginning with the publication of his book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1981), and was coincidental with many of the films under consideration here. In Brunvand's many subsequent volumes of urban legends (Brunvand, 1984, 1986, and 1989), he classified a large corpus of seemingly unrelated materials into his own taxonomy. This taxonomy becomes problematic when one considers those legends that Brunvand (1981) called "Teenage Horrors" (47); these include not only classics like the previously mentioned "The Hook" (48) but also "The Killer in the Backseat" (52), "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs" (53), and "The Roommates' Death" (57) and stories like "The Pet (Baby) in the Oven" (62) and "The Hippy Babysitter" (65). The two latter stories, although their effect is to "gross out" listeners and fill them with a sense of "horror," are very different kinds of stories to the other stories Brunvand cited in the same chapter. In later anthologies, Brunvand moved "The Killer in the Backseat" to his chapter on "Automobile" legends (Brunvand 1986, 58) and included under the same category, "The Hairy-Armed Hitchhiker" (Brunvand 1984, 25), a story that also features a psychotic murderer. Across these volumes of legends, the category of "Horrors" becomes increasingly dominated by "gross-out" stories. Whether under Brunvand's "Automobile" or "Horrors" classification, "The Hook," "The Boyfriend's Death," "The Roommate's Death," "The Killer in the Backseat," "The Hairy-Armed Hitchhiker," or the more recently circulated "Humans Can Lick Too" and "Aren't You Glad You Didn't Turn On the Lights," all feature maniacal killers as one of their chief characters. Neither "The Hippy Babysitter" nor "The Colo-Rectal Mouse" (Brunvand 1984, 78) (both classified by Brunvand as "Horrors") feature malicious individuals intending to harm/kill innocent victims and are instead based upon an intended disgust at the story's imagery. It is the legends that feature psychokillers that I am particularly interested in here, as the slasher films that emerged in the late 1970s/early 1980s seem to draw upon and reference. I refer to these legends as "Terror Tales": tales intended to create feelings of suspense and terror in the listener rather than revulsion or disgust, distinguishing them from other kinds of horror legends whose aim is mainly to gross the listener out.

Noël Carroll (1990), in *The Philosophy of Horror*, outlined what he called “art-horror”—the emotions of disgust and revulsion that horror, as a literary/filmic genre, produces and the emotional distancing effects required because such horrors are Todorovianly fantastic—that is, they cannot possibly be explained by our natural laws. Art-horror, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, signifies not only by creating cognitive categories that cannot be (Todorov’s category of the fantastic) but, furthermore, by defining what then *must be*—a cognitive ontological game, as it were (quoted in Parks 1996). For Carroll (1990),

The pleasure derived from . . . horror fiction and the source of our interest in it resides, first and foremost, in the processes of discovery, proof, and confirmation that horror fictions often employ. The disclosure of the existence of the horrific being and of its properties is the central source of pleasure in the genre; once that process of revelation is consummated, we remain inquisitive about whether such a creature can be successfully confronted, and that narrative question sees us through to the end of the story. (184)

Such an approach is, as Cynthia Freeland (1995) noted, cognitive: we play a mental game of discovery and then, recognizing that our cognitive categories of reality have been in some way challenged, attempt to understand this horror. What Brunvand categorized as “horrors,” whether homicidal maniacs or gross-out stories, are equally predicated upon the narrative structure of discovery—of the hook dangling on the door handle, of the boyfriend hung above the car, of the turkey in the crib and the baby in the oven, or of the mouse/gerbil up someone’s rectum. But like Carroll and his “art-horror,” Brunvand’s horror stories are determined largely by plot.

Folklorist Linda Dégh, on the other hand, “viewed legend not merely as a historical account [of what is true], but rather, primarily as a genre growing out of contemporary hopes and fears” (quoted in Lindahl 1996b, xii). Working out of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University in the late 1960s, Dégh and her students developed what has been referred to as “The Indiana Approach” to urban legend research, which can be characterized as “to see legend not only as a reflection of social fears but as a series of scripts for varied responses to contemporary problems” (Lindahl 1996b, xiii). Urban legends, then, are scripts for debate about what a society/culture (here understood in its most microform) believes to be true or at least possible.

In a similar fashion, Cynthia Freeland criticized Carroll (and, by extension in this connection that I am making here, Brunvand) by demanding a more ideological reading of horror films. Freeland (1995) noted,

Ideological critique interprets film texts by identifying how they represent existing power relations so as to naturalise them. Such readings can register contradictions between surface and deeper messages, so can they offer more complexity than the moral psychological condemnation of realist horror as perverse. I mean that good ideological reading can enable the critic to question and resist what she sees as problematic moral messages of films. (134–35)

Most folklorists also reject leaving legend analysis at the level of plot analysis. However, folkloristics and film studies differ here: whereas Freeland was quite right to explore and interpret ideological meanings that can result in “against-the-grain” readings of film, and some folklorists, like Dundes (see note 1) have tried this approach to legend texts too, Dégh’s “social-script” theory of legend was significantly different:

Linda Dégh . . . argues that (i) belief-related stories are “traditional” in that they reflect age-old concerns as adapted by transmitting communities; (ii) the newness of the “new” way the stories have become both fragmented in the telling and adapted to modern environments; (iii) the heart of a legend is belief, not text, and therefore esthetic considerations should not be a criterion by which it is judged. (Bennett and Smith 1996, xxxi)

For much of the following analyses, I have approached these slasher films along Déghian lines—that is, as social scripts—while also touching upon their ideological significance. This, in no means, either invalidates or exhausts further investigation: my aim here is largely to demonstrate that by asking an alternative question of these films, alternative frameworks for investigation emerge. But it should also be noted that there is a degree of ambivalence to these analyses: as discourses about the possible, Freeland’s “realist horror,” Todorov’s “uncanny,” and Oring’s “legends as tales of the possible” are treated for the sake of argument as largely analogous.

Alan Dundes, in attempting to find a morphological structure to Native American myths and folktales and realizing the inappropriateness of applying Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp (1968) to them, developed his own structural schema to deal with these narratives (Dundes 1963; see also Bordwell 1988). Daniel Barnes took Dundes’s schema and applied it to contemporary urban legends. According to Barnes (1996), there is a four-movement structure to urban legends: interdiction, violation, consequence, and attempted escape (I-V-C-AE). The interdiction phase informs the characters not to do something, although in most urban legends this phase is often implicit (Barnes 1996). The interdiction is then violated, and the consequences are outlined. These stories then conclude with the protagonists’ es-

cape, sometimes successful, sometimes not, from the consequences of violating the interdiction. Let us consider the story of "The Hook," which, as Kermodé noted, contains the essence of the slasher film. The story contains no direct interdiction, but such a narrative phase is implied: the couple should not be parked on Lovers' Lane making out. It is implied that they had been warned not to go out into the woods by themselves, nor should they be getting so intimate. The news report on the radio, informing them of the escaped lunatic with a hook for a hand, is a further interdiction to get out of there. They ignore (violate) the implicit warnings from society (do not get sexual at your age, do not go out to Lovers' Lane) and the more explicit warning from the news report (the escaped killer). The consequence of this is that the hookman attacks them; however, in this case, their attempted escape is successful, perhaps because the girl's virtue is still intact (they did not get too intimate while parked). The interdiction phase, whether stated explicitly or not, is one of the foci for discussing these narratives as representations of teenage social fears and the one I focus on in discussing the slasher films.

It is worth noting, at least parenthetically, that in all these terror tales I am considering here, there is at least one survivor of the horror (in the case of "The Hook," *no one* actually gets killed). In "The Boyfriend's Death," "The Roommate's Death," and "Aren't You Glad You Didn't Turn On the Lights," one of the two protagonists dies, while the other survives (in some variations, when the survivor discovers the horror, his or her hair turns white, and he or she ends up catatonic in an asylum). Simon Bronner (1995), in his study of campus folklore, noted:

The lingering question for the listener, then, might be whether responsibility for the tragedy belongs with the victim who took the risk of going out late at night or with the person in the room who did not answer the door because of her fear of the murderer. The issue of responsibility commonly underlies the climax of both the boyfriend's and roommate's death stories, and in each type, extreme fear and courage could each be shown to create problems in this age of adolescent independence. (171)

As Bronner noted, these legends are often used to discuss the social issues in which young people find themselves, either at college or at summer camp, as both are liminal contexts between childhood and adulthood, where young people are forced to accept adult responsibilities while still maintaining their childhood innocence. The campus dorm room and the summer campfire are also the two main contexts in which these stories are told. It is because of

these liminal contexts—of teller and place—that further credence is given to utilizing a social-script theory to these films.

Urban Legends and the Slasher Film

Well beyond Jamie Blanks's 1998 slasher-revival film *Urban Legend* sequels, the slasher film has been drawing upon this contemporary form of oral folklore from the very beginning. I would now like to consider the Dundes–Barnes morphology applied to some of these films. Prior to doing that, however, it is worth noting how folklorists have approached the slasher film and its relation to legend texts and performances. Bronner (1995), for one, noted in passing that

one also has to wonder about the influence of popular “slasher” movies, typically appealing to adolescents, and the incorporation of traditional legendary motifs into their plots. *Halloween* (1978) and its many sequels are perennial teen favorites; they regularly feature a knife-wielding attacker escaped from a loony bin, who with Hallowe'en mask in place, slashes a young woman. Many slasher films, such as *Black Christmas* (1974) and *Final Exam* (1981), use college settings as backdrops. (175)

Although Bronner picked up on the narrational context for these films (college dorms/summer campfires), for him the films were noteworthy only incidentally, as some use legendary motifs.

In much the same vein, Larry Danielson noted how films, specifically *Halloween*, use urban legend motifs. Danielson (1979) called Carpenter's film a “frightening color mosaic of urban legend themes and motifs” (214) and noted further that

the theme of illicit sexual activity avenged is clear in *Halloween*, and it is present, I think, in related oral horror stories, in particular in the many Lovers' Lane legends. . . . Other urban legends to which the film relates do not clearly express the theme. Most versions of the roommate's death, the entrapped babysitter, and the assailant in the backseat do not depict promiscuity. They do, however, portray vulnerable females prey to knife-wielding maniacs. Whether we subscribe to an orthodox Freudian explanation of this pattern or not, these scenes are too common in urban legendry to dismiss. Its meanings in different, though related legend types for individuals, male and female, are probably more complicated than we at first realize. That these motifs are so vigorously shared by film fiction and contemporary verbal art suggests their psychological potency. (219)

But we can go further than Danielson on this subject, and by examining the morphological structure of the slasher film, the role of the (often implicit) interdiction asks often different questions of the film text than traditional film theory has done.

Considering the case of *Halloween*, a film that seems to be at the center of most discussions about the slasher film, by doing an analysis of the morphological structure of the film, a different set of diegetic prohibitions emerges. We can look at *Halloween* in the way we would an urban legend by applying the I-V-C-AE structural pattern, namely, by asking, *what* is violated for the consequences to occur (i.e., Michael's attack on Annie, Lynda, Bob, and Laurie)? What is the interdiction that urban legends tell us must be violated? If, as most film critics and theorists direct us toward, the violation is against sexual taboos—a kind of Puritan-like morality—then why attack either Annie (who although “tarty” is never seen to be engaging in sexual activity) or Laurie? We assume that the reason Michael killed Judith, his sister, is because of sexual prohibitions, and these assumptions are not seriously challenged by the scholarship:

Slashers typically feature psychotic males . . . who set about systematically killing an isolated group of teenagers. Often the killer is motivated by a past sexual trauma activated by the sexual promiscuity of the victims he stalks, a convention that has led critics to see slasher movies as staunchly conservative in their sexual ideology. (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 2001, 216)⁴

Creed (1993), citing Royal Brown, noted that “the slasher film ‘grows out of the severest, most strongly anti-female aspects of a very American brand of the Judeo-Christian mythology’ in which woman, because of her sexual appetites, is held responsible for man’s fall from innocence. Woman is victimized because she is blamed for the human condition” (125).

But let me offer a minor alteration to that assumption and interpretation of the film: Does *Halloween* make narrative or cultural sense if sex is *not* the primary motivation for Michael’s rampage? Turning back to the urban legend narrative that seems to be the inspiration for the film, “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs,”⁵ what is the interdiction violated by the young babysitter? As Danielson noted, the meaning of legends is heavily dependent upon who is telling them, so when adults who have children tell this story, it could perhaps be interpreted as a warning against leaving your children with a stranger, much like the implied interdictions in stories like “The Hippy Babysitter.” But such an interpretation would have little meaning within the community of adolescent girls who disseminate the legend, and therefore it is unlikely that the story would circulate for very long.

Perhaps, as we consider the implicit interdictions in this story, we need to at least hypothesize what the babysitter's own fears are. It is not the literal belief that some psycho-killer will torment him or her from a telephone extension in the same house after brutally murdering the children, but perhaps it reflects fears regarding responsibility. Sole responsibility for a child/children in one so young themselves must weigh heavy on their minds. What if something really horrible happened while babysitting? Would you, these legends seem to ask, know what to do in an emergency? Probably, if the babysitter were responsible at all, he or she would know how to contact the parents in an emergency as well as the various phone numbers for the local police, fire department, ambulance, and/or poison control center. But who does one call when there is an escaped lunatic in the house?

The fears about *adolescent responsibility* are what lie at the center of *Halloween's* interdiction. Carpenter juxtaposes both Annie's and Laurie's babysitting skills: Annie is shown to largely ignore Lindsey, who is left alone, watching horror movies on television while Annie chats on the phone to her friends; Laurie interacts much more with Tommy, reading him stories, making popcorn, carving jack-o'-lanterns together, and talking to one another. To underline this even further, Annie abandons Lindsey to Laurie's care while she goes off to pick up her boyfriend, and Laurie sits down to watch television *with* both children. It is here that Michael attacks Annie, and while still in and around the Wallaces' house, Lynda and Bob arrive, who likewise behave irresponsibly in someone else's home by going up to the master bedroom and having sex. Laurie herself acts irresponsibly when, more concerned with her friends than her charges, leaves them asleep to go across the road to the Wallace house, where she first meets Michael. By going across the road and leaving the children unattended, Laurie brings Michael back. Suddenly, if I am in the correct ballpark here, Michael's original attack on his sister, Judith, was not so much about her having sex as it was about her not being responsible for babysitting her younger brother. Sex is merely an extension of neglect as a result of poor babysitting. I am aware that such a reading, of reducing the complex discourses surrounding American attitudes toward sex and violence against women that have developed surrounding *Halloween* and other slasher films, might be seen as a tad superficial or simplistic—that I have reduced *Halloween* to a discourse about “being responsible when you are babysitting.” This does not rule out a more psychoanalytic or gendered reading of *Halloween*: babysitting is, of course, a largely gender-specific activity; in addition, the responsibility for a child (even a temporary responsibility) has something of a maternal nurturing aspect to it, thereby making the killer's punishment/murder of babysitters (whether legendary or filmic) open to oedipal and puritanical interpretations. But when we

consider who tells these legends, to whom, and, in the case of these film variants, to whom are the films primarily addressed, the gendered and psychoanalytic interpretations are less useful than the social-script approach.

Let me turn to another example of the slasher film to see how the I-V-C-AE structure holds up: *Friday the 13th*. Here the interdiction is more difficult to identify, as the prohibition against having sex is not textually verifiable. Much scholarly work on these films seem to indicate differently, that in films like this and *Halloween*, everyone is assumed to be having rampant sex. For example, Tania Modleski (1986) noted, "In *Friday the 13th* (1980), a group of young people are brought together to staff a summer camp and are randomly murdered whenever they go off to make love" (161). Creed (1993) took this position even further, noting, "In the contemporary slasher film, the life-and-death struggle is usually between an unknown killer and a group of young people who seem to spend most their time looking for a place to have sex away from the searching eyes of adults" (125). However, closer textual analysis indicates that the only people we see having sex (or even fooling around) are the couple of unnamed counselors in the pre-credit sequence who are quickly killed and Jack and Marcie. Everyone else is neither chaste nor rampantly sexual. Drugs and alcohol, as noted in Kevin Williamson's screenplay for *Scream*, are merely extensions of the "no-sex rule," as all these are forms of pleasurable sin. However, Alice, Clover's "Final Girl"⁶ according to this assumed "no sin" set of rules, should be ripe for the proverbial chop: she takes a draw or two of a communal joint as it is passed around, participates in the game of "Strip Monopoly" (although, as fate would have it, remains almost fully clothed), and drinks alcohol. If Williamson is accurate in his self-reflexive screenplay (and he is not), Alice "sins" neither more nor less than Mrs. Voorhees's other victims. So what interdiction is violated to spark off Mrs. Voorhees's rampage? One interdiction in *Friday the 13th* is actually expressed (unlike in *Halloween*): do not reopen Camp Crystal Lake, the site where a young camper, Jason, died because the counselors were not paying proper attention to him (much like in *Halloween*). Mrs. Voorhees, it is implied, went on a murderous rampage, killing off the counselors who neglected her son the following year, depicted in the pre-credit sequence. By opening up the camp again, over twenty years later, Mrs. Voorhees returns to ensure that the camp remains shut. At this level, the film has a quality of a *local* legend, used to explain local phenomena; in this case, Why is there an abandoned summer camp on the lake? But why punish the young counselors? Sure, go after Steve Christie, the man who is opening the camp again. Go after Christie's financiers. But why go after these largely innocent kids who are just doing what kids do on summer vacation—drink, smoke, and fool around? We are once again in the realm of *Halloween*'s implied

interdiction: the yoke of responsibility cannot be easily removed. For the adolescents working at summer camps, just like the adolescents who went to see *Friday the 13th* upon its release, the fears surrounding the responsibility they have been given, particularly for the lives of younger children and this time in a residential setting (unlike a few hours babysitting), must weigh heavily on their consciousness. This interdiction about responsibility, when violated, has the same murderous consequences.

Not all slasher film interdictions tell young people to be responsible when babysitting, either for the night or over a summer. In *The Burning*, unlike *Friday the 13th*, the counselors are responsible and professional. The most immediately noteworthy legend connector with *The Burning* is that, unlike these other films wherein one needs to examine the films morphologically in order to ascertain their relationship to urban legends, “the Cropsey Maniac” had an orally circulated life in and around postwar New York summer camps (see Haring and Breslerman 1977). This local legend (for it appears to be unknown outside of New York State) tells of a respected member of the community, often a judge or local merchant, who loses a child in a tragic accident and, as a result of this loss, goes mad and begins a murder spree in the vicinity (much like Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th*). Particular attention needs to be drawn to the conclusion of the story: for Cropsey, finally cornered by the authorities, refuses to give himself up, and his shack (or barn or hut) is burned to the ground, but of course his body is never found, leaving the story open. This open-ended kind of legend narration, often de rigueur in slasher movies because of the assumed potential to become a franchise, has a different function in legend telling: here the intention is to connect the audience, hearing about something that happened in the past, with their immediate present. Rather than the “burning” of Cropsey ending the story, in *The Burning* it opens the film and, as a pre-credit sequence, introduces us to the film’s monster. In *The Burning*, during the first night of the campers’ canoe excursion, the counselor, Todd, tells the legend of the burning of Cropsey and of Camp Blackfoot’s “haunted past” with the punch line that Cropsey is still hunting in these woods. Todd had arranged with another counselor to leap out at the campers on that cue line, frightening them in a typical campfire tale scenario.⁷ It turns out, in a later flashback, that Todd was one of those responsible for severely burning Cropsey, so the telling of the legend of Camp Blackfoot takes on a different resonance but one that recreates the norms of the legend-telling context (around a campfire). At the end of the film, Todd survives by killing Cropsey properly, aided by the shy camper Alfred. The film ends with another counselor, implied to be the grown-up Alfred, now telling this tale to campers around a campfire, thereby

returning the narrative, albeit fictively, back into the oral tradition, much like “The Jersey Devil” episode of *The X-Files* I discuss in chapter 5.

Haring and Breslerman’s (1977) interpretation of this legend, particularly with regard to the story’s function as “social script,” is equally applicable to these slasher films. The authors noted that

the oral legends . . . function . . . to promote a feeling of solidarity among the hearers: the setting and main actor of the story appear outside the camp or school groups, and the action of mayhem and insanity is of a type solidly condemned by the society to which the hearers belong. [Another] function is to integrate new campers into the camp society by imposing on them the local [belief] traditions. . . . Finally, of course, the story explicitly tries [quoting William Bascom] “to insure conformity to the accepted cultural norms,” in this case the prohibition against leaving the camp grounds. (21)

Not only does *The Burning* re-create the Cropsey-storytelling context, but these slasher films also, to some extent, fulfill the functions of the legends. Obviously, there are fundamental differences between an orally transmitted urban legend and a horror movie, even a horror movie *based on* an urban legend; the two media are certainly not synonymous. However, within the social-script theory advocated here, both slasher films and urban legends demonstrate the ideological functions of maintaining categories of normalcy and transmission of belief traditions, not unlike what Freeland argues for with her ideological criticism but using different terms. But it is the final function of Haring and Breslerman’s characterization of the “Cropsey Maniac” stories, of ensuring that campers do not wander off into the woods on their own, that I want to turn to. In all these terror tale urban legends and the films being considered here, it is when one wanders off—from the campsite, of the university campus, from home, or from school—that one is at risk of psychotic killers. Freeland (1995) noted that part of the conservative ideology of these films, just like with urban legends, is “to perpetuate a climate of fear and random violence where anyone is a potential victim” (138; this connection between slasher movies and urban legends was explicitly noted by Danielson 1979, 219). This potential of violence, for the on-screen characters in slasher movies and for the “friends of a friend” of urban legends and for us listeners/viewers, underlines that these narratives are predicated upon what is *possible* and that, assuming we do not wish to end up as grist for these killers’ mills, we need to heed their narrative interdictions.

Another major context for the telling of urban legends is the college dormitory, so it is not surprising that the dorm room is frequently the setting for a number of legends themselves: “The Roommate’s Death,” “Aren’t You Glad

You Didn't Turn On the Lights," and "The Cadaver Arm," to name just a few. The sorority/fraternity house is also the setting for a number of slasher films. These, not surprisingly, have a different set of interdictions to them. The Canadian film *Black Christmas*, although largely ignored as the first of the modern slasher films, demonstrates many of the similarities to urban legends, although it is not based on any one in particular. Interestingly, folklorists Paul Smith and Sandy Hobbs (1990) identified *Black Christmas* as being based on the urban legend known by them as the "Sorority House Murders," but unfortunately this legend seems to be known only by them, and I have come across no articles or reports of this story circulating orally as an independent legend (146). That being said, Danielson (1979) did note the following:

The most recent illustration of urban legend phenomenon paralleled in film and intensified by historical event occurred in 1978. On January 15 of that year, two women were murdered and three others beaten in a Florida State University sorority house by an assailant who had secretly entered the building in the early morning. Scheduled for national television viewing the following weekend was the movie *Stranger in the House*, a 1974 film unsuccessfully released in theatres under the titles *Black Christmas* and *Silent Night, Evil Night*. The thriller dealt with a story familiar to many folklorists. During the Christmas season, sorority house residents are frightened by obscene phone calls and then by a systematic attack on individual women in the residence. The National Broadcasting Company tactfully substituted another movie because of the previous weekend's Florida murders. (212)

Certainly there are a number of terror tale–urban legends that occur within a sorority house, noted previously, but it is only Danielson who picks up on the explicit reference to the legend of "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs" with the motif of the obscene phone caller calling from within the same house. In *Black Christmas*, there is no background story and no real motive for the killer's actions other than that he is insane. Of the girls living in the house, Barb, Claire, Jess, Phyl, and their housemother, Mrs. Mac, only drunk Mrs. Mac and the drunk and foul-mouthed Barb could be considered in the same category as Lynda and Annie or Jack and Marcie—the others are more or less innocent. In fact, the "Final Girl," Jess, is not only sexually active but also pregnant and considering an abortion. Therefore, the basic rules of the slasher film do not apply here (and as a film made in 1974, well before their apparent codification after *Halloween*, why should it?). But what interdiction was violated to send the killer down the stairs to murder the residents? At one level, Barb clearly antagonizes the killer on the phone, *giving* obscene verbal abuse as much as she receives it. Phyl warns her *not* to antagonize him imme-

diately before the first murder, of Claire. Looking at *Black Christmas* as a form of “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” legend, one can hypothesize that the implied interdiction is not to antagonize an obscene phone caller, even by talking to him or her. We all remember what our parents told us about obscene phone callers: to hang up immediately or, as the police officer on the phone in *When a Stranger Calls*, a film explicitly based on this legend, suggests, to blow a whistle loudly into the phone, deafening the caller. What we are warned *not to do* is to engage the caller in any kind of conversation—that is what he (usually he) wants. Ironically, in *Black Christmas* and *When a Stranger Calls*, as well as the legends themselves, the babysitter/sorority girls *have* to keep the caller on the phone so that the police can trace the call back to the house the girl or girls are in. When this interdiction is broken, by engaging directly with the obscene caller, the results are tragic.

However, diegetically, in both films and the legend, the killer is already in the house when the calls are made, and if that is the implied interdiction, then how not talking to the caller will prevent the murders is not considered. I have already discussed the responsibility issue with regard to one interpretation of this legend and its application in film, so I offer up an alternative that deals specifically with the terror tales set in sorority houses: sororities, like fraternities, are predicated upon the notional concept of “brothers” and “sisters,” of being among family. In *Black Christmas*, as in the sorority house-based terror tales, it is when that familial bond breaks down that the killer can strike. For example, in both “The Roommate’s Death” and “Aren’t You Glad You Didn’t Turn On the Lights,” the murders happen during vacation time, when the campus and, in particular, the sorority houses/dormitories are less populated. *Black Christmas* takes place as the sorority sisters are in the process of going home for the holidays. At an obvious level, these legends and films underline the fears one has of being left alone in an unfamiliar place (the university). However, sorority and fraternity bonds are further odd insofar as they utilize the language of the family (brother and sisters), but everyone goes elsewhere outside of term time. They are a temporary family but not under the same conventional rules that govern a blood family. The ideology of the Greek system (as the sorority/fraternity system is known—cf. Bronner 1995) is such that one should be so involved in Greek life, that these people *become* your family. When one does not behave to one’s fraternity/sorority brothers and sisters as a family, bad things happen—like letting them go to parties by themselves or, conversely to stay in the dorm room studying, only to end up butchered by the psychotic killer every university has. So the interdiction in *Black Christmas* may well have to do with a violation of the ideology of the sorority, of the Greek system. Claire is murdered

after being taunted by Barb when she goes up to her room by herself—had anyone followed Claire to see if she was alright, they might have saved her life. Likewise, Barb is allowed to become dangerously drunk, and when she has an asthma attack in the middle of the night, although Phyl does comfort her initially, she is left alone for the killer to stab. Jess does not confide in any of her sorority sisters about her pregnancy, leaving her to face the abortion by herself. When the social order of the sorority breaks down, psychotic murderers are able to strike. Bronner (1995) noted something similar in the use of the oral legends: “there’s also a question about the responsibility that women must take for one another in the potentially intimidating setting of college, and the values they must hold there” (171). And, when those values are violated, the horror begins.⁸

All the films I am discussing so far—*Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *The Burning*, and *Black Christmas*—have implicit and not-so-implicit connections with orally circulated urban legends that, I argue, mark them as distinct from the *giallo*-like murder mysteries that are predominant in the genre. But what happens when one attempts to apply the I-V-C-AE structure to the *giallo*-esque slasher films? Take, for example, *Terror Train*, where, although the identity of the killer is more or less known, because of the context of a costume party where everyone is masked, the killer could be anyone. The “past event” sequence is directly tied to urban legends in its representation of medical school pranks, most notably the legend of “The Cadaver Arm,” and linked to the variety of legends about “Fatal Initiations” (Bronner 1995, 162). In the “past event” sequence of the film, a fraternity initiation is shown to go disastrously wrong. As an initiation, all pledges must lose their virginity on the night of the big Sigma Phi homecoming party. One poor pledge, Kenny Hampson, is taken upstairs to the frat house with the promise of sex with one brother’s girlfriend, Alana. Alana calls Kenny over to the bed, but unbeknownst to him, “Alana” is actually a purloined corpse from the anatomy lab. When Kenny discovers this, he goes mad. Going mad as a result of “The Cadaver Arm” or, in this case, just “The Cadaver” is a standard concluding motif of these legends. As Bronner noted in conclusion to one telling of “The Cadaver Arm” story, “So they go in, and they find him and he’s sitting in the closet, chewing on the hand and his hair’s all white” (159)—not quite what happens in *Terror Train*, but Kenny does go mad and is institutionalized as a result of this prank. The film hypothesizes what would happen if that practical joke’s poor dupe not only went mad but also decided to take his revenge out on the other fraternity brothers by murdering them. Included within *Terror Train*’s diegesis is even a reference to the verisimilitude of the oral tradition by noting that since that night the university has outlawed Sigma Phi

parties, which is why they are having *this* party on a privately hired train.⁹ But beyond this, the murders are localized only toward those directly responsible for the Kenny prank. There is no interdiction here, as the authorities themselves have put a stop to fraternity parties, nor is there any kind of warning *not* to have the party that could be violated. The boys of Sigma Phi have already been reprimanded, so Kenny's revenge is overly individualized, thereby violating the narrative's legendlike openness and discursive aspects.

Conclusion

The slasher film, like the urban legends that these films so closely resemble, may be seen to share one final similarity, that of *effect*. Barnes (1966) noted, although specifically referring to urban legends when he did so, that "the immediate function . . . is obviously to *scare* the listener" (311, emphasis added). The author continued, "but once again, there is strong evidence of didactic purpose, both implied by the teller (who has been, in many instances, a 'hall counselor' or a 'big sister') and inferred by the listener" (311). This didacticism within terror tale telling, although rarely explicit, contains strong implied moral purposes beyond, although not exclusive to, sexual behavior. These may seem banal, but for folklorists specifically and cultural scholars more generally, these narratives can be seen as moral templates to be used as behavioral surveys of contemporary adolescent mores, that is, as social scripts.

Applying morphological and social-script approaches to these films reveals a different set of questions. Sometimes these questions, particularly regarding the automatic assumption of gendered discourse, offer new interpretive strategies to these films. This is not to discount the gender debates in these films or in film scholarship, but such interpretations should not be *de facto*. Although sex is often punished in these films, as is drinking and drugs, a consideration of the slasher genre, in terms of urban legend scholarship, also reveals questions about adolescent responsibility—as Bronner (1995) called the campus-told legends, "a social map of teenage transition between childhood and adulthood" (169). Although referring specifically to college campus lore, the same could be said of adolescent babysitter and summer camp lore, for they, too, negotiate this liminal development period between childhood and adulthood. But, if nothing more, I hope this entire book, by its folkloristically informed approaches, has demonstrated that even our taxonomic schematics need revising on these films, whether by content (Wood 1984), film form (Schoell 1985), genre (Clover 1992; Creed 1993), special makeup effects (McCarty 1984), or narrative structure (Dika 1990). The popularity of these films, based on the number of variants, derivatives, sequels,

copies, and downright rip-offs that were produced, at the very least *points* to some kind of connection with the North American adolescent culture of the late 1970s/early 1980s. Dika (1990) noted that

what is demonstrated here, then, is not only that an individual film made a sizeable impact on the viewing audience but that a particular story formula was so successful that the demand for it by its selective audience (i.e., a predominantly young one) encouraged the producers and distributors to continue the cycle of films. (15)

But, even more to the point,

the stalker film did not spontaneously spring into being because of a social impulse, but was originally engineered to embody a personal appraisal of an ongoing conflict. The fact that it continued through a sustained response from its audience, however, indicates that there was some congruence or appreciation of that attitude by the audience. (134)

The psychoanalytic readings of Creed, Clover, and Dika, which posit specific violence-against-women and the-punishment-of-sexuality interpretations, even though these are recognized and accepted interpretations of the film cycle, are not the only schema through which to view these films individually.

Using an urban legend morphology to examine these films, specifically in terms of the films' interdictions (when they have them), asks different questions of the texts. Just as there is little ethnographic evidence to prove that psychoanalytic interpretations are conscious among these films' audiences, neither is there much to support the social-script hypothesis. What now needs to happen is for proper audience studies to be done on actual audiences' interpretations. Of course, some ethnographic work has begun in this area, specifically the studies by Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1998) and Brigid Cherry (2002) and to a lesser extent Annette Hill (1997). But in the end I wonder whether any chance of ascertaining audience cognition of these films' interdictions as social scripts has been irreparably destroyed by *Scream's* self-reflexivity: by explicitly telling its audience what "the rules for a horror movie are." Even if incorrect, are these interdictions not now proscribed?

Notes

1. Folklorists have also attempted psychoanalytical interpretations of these urban legends, most notably Alan Dundes's psychoanalytic reading of "The Hook." Re-

ardless of the veracity of such readings, Dundes (1971) noted that “either folklorists must begin to try to interpret legend materials as traditional products of human fantasy, or they must forfeit any claim to be anything other than antiquarian butterfly collectors and classifiers” (22), in other words, the motif spotters of whom I am so critical throughout this book.

2. In folkloristic terms, this phenomenon is called “ostension”—the acting out of a legend narrative (for a consideration of ostension in film, as I discuss in the next two chapters). It is further worth noting, as Mark Seltzer (2000) did, that “‘there is some evidence that actual serial killers may pattern themselves on fictional accounts.’ There is evidence too that these fictional accounts are often based on official accounts, which in turn often draw on fictional accounts” (105). Further research is needed on the role of urban legends in this process of “acting out” fictional stories, or ostension, and this phenomenon’s connection with horror cinema.

3. *Elm Street* creator Wes Craven has pointed out that Krueger was intentionally a reaction to the slasher films of the late 1970s and early 1980s, “a backlash against the *Friday the 13th* [series]” (Schoell and Spencer 1992, 180). The same authors also noted, “Freddy is no dull and typical practitioner of ‘stalk and slash.’ He would be appalled by those mute, dumb, and unimaginative fellows who merely plod around in masks or cloaks, thumping people on the head like petulant psychotic ninnies. Freddy has class. He . . . dreams up truly fiendish, original, chillingly clever and macabre ways of offing his victims. . . . Other crazies pop out of closets or crawl out from under bed—Freddy rips out of your very dreams, tearing out of your body or rising out of the bathwater” (1).

4. An alternative perspective on this assumption regarding the conservative nature of the slasher films, as well as their reproduction in multiple forms, can be seen by applying Walter Ong’s (1982) “psychodynamics of orality” to these films’ storytelling structures, much like I did in chapter 4. That being said, these psychodynamics are less applicable to the recent revival of the slasher films but, because of their *giallo*-like narratives, are more *literary* in their narrative logic. Furthermore, one associates the word *conservative* ideologically, that is, as in *political* conservatism, and in no uncertain terms are any of these movies progressive in ideological terms, but this, too, is one of Ong’s (1982) psychodynamics: to challenge the social order, to call it into question (or any of the precepts that make up that order), risks forgetting the generations of work that built it. Individually, an audience member may choose to accept, challenge, or otherwise problematize the films, but as a general address to a primarily audiovisual audience, vernacular cinema cannot encourage “intellectual experimentation” (41). Unfortunately, space does not permit me to fully explore this application; that will have to wait for another book.

5. Vera Dika (1990) noted, “Yablans offered . . . Carpenter . . . to direct a feature film based on the idea of ‘the babysitter murders’” (30). Danielson (1979) took this observation a step further by noting, “*Halloween* is something else. It is a composite of themes and motifs familiar to any folklorist who has paid attention to these oral horror stories. . . . As in many legends of this kind, attention in the movie to the

specific location and time of occurrence precedes the action, which involves a vulnerable adolescent endangered by a violent madman, either in a baby-sitting situation or an amorous tryst, or in both” (217).

6. Clover (1992) defines the role of the Final Girl thus: “The one character of stature who does live to tell the tale is in fact the Final Girl. She is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation” (44).

7. Bronner (1995) noted this as a standard performance style of campfire storytelling: “In its formulaic structure, this fatal initiation story is reminiscent of playful horror tales often told at summer camps. . . . In these tales, a ghost comes closer and closer to the final victim until the teller startles the listener by grabbing him or her or feigning death” (163). This style of legend performance is also re-created in the film *Meatballs*, where Bill Murray tells the story of “The Hook,” which I discuss in the previous chapter.

8. Barnes (1966), in an earlier piece, offered a slightly different interpretation of these campus urban legends. He noted “the function of [these legends] is not only to frighten the listener for the moment, but to discourage him from staying in the dormitory or fraternity house over the holidays” (307).

9. Bronner (1995) noted, “Told in college, the horror variety of initiation stories is frequently offered to explain why a campus does not have fraternities or sororities” (165).

PART FIVE

OSTENSION

CHAPTER NINE



Film and Ostension: The Case of *Candyman*

As long as this man was known only by his deeds, he held untold power over the imagination; but the human truth beneath the terrors would, she knew, be bitterly disappointing.

—Barker (1985, 24)

Throughout the past few chapters, I have been using the term *ostension*. While I certainly anticipate the context of the word's usage will have been self-evident, I now want to nail down a more concrete understanding of the term. Further to the point, in this chapter, I want to discuss the 1992 Bernard Rose horror film *Candyman* as a concrete example of this theory. In the next chapter, I open this discussion out even further to discuss the reality TV series *Most Haunted*. But before I get too ahead of my self, as I argue later, *Candyman* not only demonstrates that film is ostensive behavior but also privileges the ostensive debate within its diegesis.

Ostension

The term *ostension*, at least within folkloristics, refers to the presentation (as opposed to the representation) of a legend text (Dégh 1995); instead of a legendary narrative being *told* (i.e., represented through storytelling), it is *shown* as direct action (i.e., presented). The term originates from the Latin *ostendere*, meaning “to show,” but its current academic usage can be traced back to St. Augustine, who, in his *De Magistro*, used the term for

the teaching of language through a direct appeal to the thing to which a word refers. Umberto Eco, in distinguishing between “primitive” and “dictionary” words (i.e., words that refer to something concrete versus words that only refer to other words), noted that understanding “primitive” words occurred through ostensive action: the experience of the direct relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (thing) (Eco 1984, 50; see also Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 5–7; Eco 1976, 224–26).¹ Dégh and Vázsonyi borrowed this idea from Eco and used ostension to examine “legend-related Hallowe’en atrocities and additionally explore[d] a number of contemporary cases of criminal ostension” (Dégh 2001, 427). Dégh and Vázsonyi’s focus was primarily on various forms of “copycat” crime; murderers who used previous stories about murderers (often drawing on popular-culture accounts) as templates for emulation and improvement on their “killing records” (Dégh 2001, 434). Parallel to Dégh and Vázsonyi, Sylvia Grider was also looking at how Hallowe’en legends become ostensive (cited in Ellis 1990). As Bill Ellis (1989) noted, “Traditional narratives exist not simply as verbal texts to be collected, transcribed and archived. They are also maps for action” (218).

Despite being largely responsible for introducing ostension into the folklorist’s vocabulary, Dégh (2001) recognized that Ellis had developed the study of folkloristic ostension further. Ellis divided the idea of legend ostension into separate categories of action. For example, “quasi-ostension” “is the observer’s interpretation of puzzling evidence in terms of narrative tradition” (Ellis 1989, 208). In many respects, as Ellis points out, this echoes what David Hufford (1989) terms “the cultural source hypothesis,” wherein “only a person who believes in a concept will actually experience it” (Ellis 1989, 208, and discussed in more detail in chapter 5). Applying quasi-ostension within the legend traditions explored here, only someone who a priori believes in, for example, ghosts will encounter one; the argument further suggests that the encounter occurred only because of the individual’s belief that it would. Ellis differentiated quasi-ostension from “pseudo-ostension,” which he defined as “imitating the outlines of a known narrative to perpetuate a hoax” (208).² If quasi-ostension suggests that no paranormal phenomena are possible and are therefore perceived as such only because of an existing belief tradition, pseudo ostension plays upon those existing beliefs in order to dupe the believer, as in the many cases of fraudulent psychic mediums. Both quasi- and pseudo-ostension Ellis distinguished from “ostension itself” (209). This is where individuals, after hearing certain stories, decide to engage in legendlike activities themselves, ranging from trying to reenact satanic rituals and poisoning Hallowe’en candy to *avoiding* areas

thought to be places of satanic ritual or having Hallowe'en candy inspected for fear of tampering. Most significantly in this discussion, Ellis recognized that all three of these forms of ostension are *not* mutually exclusive and often feed on each other synergistically. Thus, a case of quasi-ostension may lead to another case of pseudo-ostension, or an ostensive action could spark quasi-ostensive panics.

I believe we can take these discussions even further: any legend text dramatized through popular culture (specifically films) is also a kind of ostension, particularly when we are *shown* the narrative through actions rather than having the story retold to us in narration, a point I outline in chapter 7. Such a "cinematic" ostension implicitly recognizes an audience by encouraging some form of postpresentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented. There is also an implicit recognition of the fictive form of this narration (a fiction film) but equally a recognition that the stories upon which certain films are based come from "genuine urban legends." As I discuss later, whether the stories of hook-handed killers or ghosts in the mirror (as they appear in Bernard Rose's *Candyman*) are believed or not, such veracity is secondary to the discussion of their *possibility*, which, as I have been arguing throughout, is an essential aspect of the legend in general. I would further propose a "legend matrix" that, while still positioning belief and disbelief on one axis, would also recognize such debates as mediated through a specific (in this case, cinematic) text. The problem with the term *cinematic* ostension is that it semantically excludes television (or other forms of popular culture). Perhaps "mass-mediated ostension" would be a more appropriate and less restrictive term, thereby incorporating all forms of mass media. Mass-mediated ostension recognizes that *presented* legend materials, whether dramatized or "documentary," make up the medium through which extratextual debates surrounding the legend's veracity occur. These debates may also be textual (such as debating the veracity of the phenomena within a film or television itself), but such textual debates about veracity are not essential to a mass-mediated ostensive legend matrix.

Turning now to the film that is the focus of this particular chapter, *Candyman* tells the story of Helen, a graduate student at the University of Illinois who is researching urban legends. Specifically, her attention has focused on one particular legend, that of "Candyman," a hook-handed monster who is supposed to come out of a mirror when his name is said five times. Helen's disbelief in the legend is challenged when the Candyman comes to her and seduces her away from the land of the living to the land of rumor and legend.

Candyman and Legend Materials

As I note in chapter 1, Bruce Jackson (1989), writing in the *Journal of American Folklore*, described the work of folklorists who approach feature films as predominantly motif spotting. It has been further suggested that the most direct way for individual fiction films to be considered as “folklore” is to follow some of the theoretical writings that tie folklore studies to literature. Neil Grobman (1979), to reiterate, proposed that one must assess “how authors use folklore in their writings” (17). To follow this procedure requires the scholar to identify the author in direct contact with folklore and its scholarly debates. The problem with this approach when applied to feature-length fiction films is that it reifies a debate cinema studies has engaged in since the mid-1950s: Who is the author of a film?

Candyman is based on a short story by British author and filmmaker Clive Barker. Barker’s story “The Forbidden,” although it lays the basic narrative framework for *Candyman*, differs from Bernard Rose’s film in many significant ways. Therefore, in order to even attempt to discuss “who is the author of *Candyman*” (Barker or Rose), we need to consider their actual contributions to the filmmaking process. For Barker, the “Candyman” narrative in his short story is a “beauty and the beast” variant, wherein a sociologist studying graffiti on a Liverpool Council Estate is seduced by the hook-handed demon. Rose keeps the barest of bones from the Barker original, specifically the seduction of Helen by Candyman and his offer to her of immortality, but changes the context considerably. Helen is no longer a sociologist, but, if not a folklorist, she certainly is researching folklore materials (urban legends). This is not to say that Barker’s Helen is not likewise engaging in folkloristic research with her graffiti study, but the difference is between Rose’s explicit folkloristics and Barker’s implicit folkloristics. Although one could develop a study outlining Barker’s use of folklore and folkloristic materials as a writer, this chapter deals only with how Rose uses Barker’s story and adds the folkloristic materials to his films.

As I noted, *Candyman* is a basic “beauty and the beast” story (AT 425) that replaces the “beast” with the “hook-handed killer” motif from urban legendry. Candyman is summoned, diegetically, by reciting his name five times while looking in a mirror (a motif that has its analogue with the ritual of “Mary Worth” in the United States and northern Europe). Drawing upon my methodology outlined in chapter 7, some of the urban legends in *Candyman* are ostensibly embedded, while others are dialogically embedded. We can examine these motifs by thus dividing them. Those ostensive motifs that make up the diegesis of the film are not limited to this fusion of “beauty and

the beast” with “the hook-handed killer” and the ritual of “Mary Worth.” Other ostensive motifs based on urban legends include “Razor Blades Found in Halloween Candy” (Candyman is presumably responsible for that), “Child Emasculated in Public Washroom” (S176), and even the traditional British legend of Gelert (B331.2). Other urban legends are dialogically embedded: “The Hippie Babysitter” who cooks the child instead of the turkey and “Alligators in the Sewers,” to name but two.

The problem with this analysis is now that one has identified these legends as being in evidence in the film, what does one do with them? To call *Candyman* either an amalgamation or an enactment of urban legend does not do the film a service. Its sum is greater than these constituent parts. However, some folklore scholars are content at leaving matters thus.

John Ashton noted that “a series of full and detailed studies of the way in which such materials [folklore] enter into and influence the creative process could tell us much about the workings of the literary creator” (quoted in Grobman 1979, 37). True, but this kind of analysis does not begin to approach the meaning of *Candyman*. If we were to leave our analysis at the connection between folklore materials and their representation within a particular text, in this case a major motion picture, then we must ask of ourselves whether we have captured the experience of the text. With regard to *Candyman*, we have not even come close. Analysis of this sort, although valid to a point, denies the film its overriding power and therefore, ultimately, its meaning.

Danielson (1979) noted how “popular cinematic art can both promulgate and reflect oral traditional plots and their motifs in contemporary circulation as well as the anxieties that create them” (219; and noted in the previous chapter). If so, then what relationship does the Candyman/Mary Worth legend have to contemporary anxieties? Robin Wood (1979), in what film studies could consider a seminal piece on the horror film, noted, “The Monster is, of course much more protean, changing from period to period as society’s basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments” (14). For Danielson, the genre itself is reflective of societal stress (also echoed in Wyckoff 1993). Wood would appear to agree but refocused attention not on the genre but on the relationship demonstrated by the genre’s dramatis personae, the relationship between monster and victim.

The central relationship in *Candyman* is just that between Candyman and Helen: between monster and human or the beast and the beauty. Although eroticized and voyeuristic, the Helen/Candyman relationship can be analytically reduced to the stereotype of a white woman/African American man sexual relationship, thereby problematizing this racial dimension by Rose making

the character African American. The anxieties expressed by the film (and only the film, for in “The Forbidden,” Candyman’s race is never expressed; neither are the residents the Liverpool Council Estate, which is the locus of the story, racialized) seem to center on male African American sexuality as directed toward white women. Yet at the same time, the film also romanticizes African American urban poverty. Helen herself demonstrates a distinct preference for African American companionship, from her research assistant to her “romance” with Candyman. The “contemporary anxieties” theory, which I do not deny is valid and relevant, points to a fear of white fetishization of African American culture.³ The problem remains one of academic focus: if we are talking about the cultural discourse of an urban legend or of a horror movie, then this kind of analysis is particularly relevant but only so for other scholars. We still have not engaged with the film as *experience*.

What Is Candyman?

Toward the end of 1994, a few years after the film was released in cinemas and a few months after the film’s appearance on home video, a discussion of Candyman-type legends appeared on the Internet’s Folklore Discussion List (folklore@listserv.tamu.edu). To deal with the responses, I needed some sort of taxonomic system. I used the following schema: if the responses make reference to Candyman-type stories the poster has heard about but not experienced, I classified them as legend texts; if the poster actually tried the rite him- or herself, then I classified these stories as game texts.

Although the name “Candyman” given to the monster in both the film and the short story is unique within this fictional narrative, Candyman has his analogue in the oft-collected “Mary Worth” narrative (also known as “Mary Whales,” “Blood Mary,” or even the “Virgin Mary”). One example of the Candyman-as-legend type of posting is the following: “My sister swore that if you stood in front of a mirror at night in a dark room, that you could call up a vision of ‘Bloody Mary’” (Alicia 1994, October 19; in other postings: “bloody Virgin Mary” or “Mary Worth”). Taxonomically, what makes this narrative a legend is the utterance of the belief that by standing in front of a mirror, some entity can be called forth in a narrative form, albeit, in this case, as an abbreviated narrative.

Here is a transcript of the legend as it is presented in the film. The speaker of the following legend text is an unnamed female student at the university from whom Helen is collecting the story. The dialogue within her narrative is presented here in italics to differentiate it from the storyteller’s voice.

This is the scariest story I ever heard. And it's totally true. Happened a few years ago near Moses Lake, in Indiana. Claire was babysitting for the Johnsons. And, uh, Billy, pulled up on his motorcycle. Now she wasn't even going out with Billy; she was actually going out with Michael, for about six months, but, uh, she always kinda . . . had the hots for Billy 'cause he was like a bad boy. And Michael was . . . he was just so nice. So anyway, she decides that tonight's the night that she's going to give Billy what she never gave to Michael.

Claire: Have you ever heard of Candyman?

Billy: No.

Claire: Well, his right hand is sawn off. He has a hook jammed in the bloody stump. And if you look in the mirror and you say his name five times, he'll appear behind you, breathing down your neck. Wanna try it?

So Billy began. He looked in the mirror, and he said:

Billy: Candyman. Candyman. Candyman. Candyman.

Claire: No one ever got past four. [Billy makes an amorous movement toward Claire.] Not here. Go downstairs. I have a surprise for you.

She looked in the mirror. And I don't know why, but she said his name the last time.

Claire: Candyman.

She turned out the lights. . . . And what he saw turned his hair white from shock. Killed her. Split her open with his hook. And then killed the baby too. And Billy got away. But soon after he went crazy. My roommate's boyfriend knows him.

Rose, in writing the screenplay for *Candyman*, develops this kernel narrative into a full-blown, fully performed urban legend. Within the film, "Candyman" exists both as a legend and as a game. The film begins, after a voice-over by Candyman himself, with this dramatized narrative of the "Candyman" story. Within the narrative, we, as the cinema audience, witness the game being played. The sequence also demonstrates a play of narrative within narrative, which I believe to be significant for Rose's use of cinema as ostension. The sequence begins with a narrative told within the diegesis; we see the listener but are denied seeing the speaker. When we are brought into the narrative world of the storyteller's narrative, we are presented with an alternative diegesis, the world being told. This second world, although maintaining verisimilitude with both the *Candyman* diegesis and our own world, negotiates its own plenitude in terms of the complete narrative being told within the *Candyman* narrative. This first narration of a "Candyman" legend, the audiences' introduction to the tradition according to Rose's visual

rhetoric, is presented as a minimovie within the larger film. Furthermore, I believe that Rose creates this mirror universe, this movie within a movie, because Helen (whom we have already identified as the listener to the story being told) *hears* the narrative as a movie. Rose is hereby creating a theoretical argument: that storytellers' audiences visualize for themselves the narratives presented in, what for our Western modern culture would be, a "like a movie" analogue. And therefore, for Rose, cinema, as a medium of narration, is linked to traditional oral storytelling.

We can separate the legend from the game quite easily with this narrative, and I believe it is important to do so for the sake of analysis. For the purposes of this chapter, the game of Candyman is the activity of staring into a mirror and reciting his name five times. The legends of Candyman are those stories told *about* people who try the game and actually see the monster appear. The storyteller, in the film, is telling an urban legend about someone she has heard of playing the "Candyman" game and the horrifying results that occurred. If we draw a rough sequence of events at the narrative and diegetic levels, certain patterns emerge: we begin with a representation of the narrative ("This is the scariest story I ever heard."), which is followed by a presentation of the narrative (the movie within a movie). Next comes a representation of the game ("Have you ever heard of Candyman?"), which is followed by the game's presentation ("Candyman. Candyman."). Especially noteworthy is the mediation between the game's representation and the game's presentation by the narrator herself ("So Billy began."). The territory between legend and play becomes cloudy in the film, reflecting the cloudy nature of the tradition the film is working from (the Mary Worth game/stories).

This brings us to discuss the game itself. In 1978, Janet Langlois published what has been considered the definitive paper on the ritual, and in 1988, Bengt af Klintberg explored the game's European variants. The ritual is also described in Mary and Herbert Knapp's (1976) *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children*. By way of introduction to the Candyman-type game, the Knapps described it thus:

A child summons Mary Worth, alias Bloody Mary, alias Mary Jane, by going into the bathroom alone at night, turning out the lights, staring into the mirror, and repeating "Mary Worth," softly but distinctly, forty-seven times. She comes at you out of the mirror, with a knife in her hand and a wart on her nose. (242)

A slight variation is offered by Harriet Engle (1994):

4 or 5 girls (boys didn't seem to be interested in this one) would sit in a small circle under cover of someone's coat. It had to be dark, of course. . . . We'd join

hands, and call for someone named “Mary Wolf.” I forget the exact formula of the summons. Usually one of the girls would shriek, and claim that “Mary” had scratched her with one of her claws. The scratch mark was duly admired by the other players, and then the game would continue. (n.p.)

We can generalize to some degree about some of the primary characteristics of the game phenomenon: the recitation of the name (be it *Candyman*, *Mary Worth*, *Mary Wolf*, or any other variant) a number of times, darkness, and supernatural manifestation. The mirror motif would be a secondary characteristic of the experiences, for, as Engle noted, the rite could occur within a darkened closet.

The descriptions of *Mary’s/Candyman’s* appearance also differ tremendously depending on the spatial and temporal contexts in which the game is collected. *Mary* has been described as having claws (Engle 1994) or as holding a knife and having a wart on her nose (Knapp and Knapp 1976). But *Mary* has also been described as appearing in toto: “*Mary* would then appear in the mirror, behind your reflection, with either good or evil intent, depending on who was calling (or who was telling the story)” (Del Negro 1994). A further variation on *Mary’s* appearance and one that indicates the creative genius of children is related in another posting: “The color she appears will indicate her judgment of you. Blue = you are good and she will protect you from harm; white = she will haunt you; red = she’s very angry! and will murder you” (Babb 1994). It is Barker and Rose who introduce the motif of the hook-handed killer into this tradition.

The Meaning of Play

Linda Dégh (1994b) has noted that “horror movies [along with other entertainment] are all harmless everyday games” (121). I would agree, but I would also take this argument even further. If we compare the theoretical writings that have emerged from discussing horror story narration and playing games, such as “*Mary Worth*,” with the involvement one has with a horror movie, a highly distinct analogue emerges. Knapp and Knapp (1976) argued that “flirting with fear is a way of learning to control it, a way of learning to empathize with others who are frightened, and a way of embellishing one’s life with a little dramatic fiction” (242). Klintberg (1988), with specific regard to the ritual of *Mary Worth*, likewise noted,

“Black Madame” [a European variant of *Mary Worth*] may be seen as a game with the help of which children investigate the unknown and terrifying. It is

reminiscent of their ghost stories, where one finds the same greediness to experience fear. (155–56)

Both Klintberg and the Knapps agree that the importance of experiencing fear is learning to control it (Klintberg 1988; Knapp and Knapp 1976). Bill Ellis explored how adolescents' experiences with a Ouija board are, in many respects, a more "grown-up" version of playing Mary Worth, and it should be noted that Ellis's adolescents are the same audience demographic as for horror movies like *Candyman*. Ellis (1994) noted that "such mock ordeals [i.e., role-playing games, Ouija boards, and playing Mary Worth] work only when they are set up carefully in terms of predictable narrative structures, so that the youth could predict what was likely to come next" (79).

Ellis's comment is especially relevant for the study of cinema. Hollywood narrative cinema, as a highly coded and structured narrative form, is predicated upon this type of predictability. Robin Wood (1979) noted this principle of predictability by characterizing the one metatheme of horror cinema as "normality is threatened by the Monster" (14). According to Wood, although the monster is a figure of horror and revulsion, we root for the monster in (usually) his destruction of our culture: "Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (15). The resolution in horror cinema returns society to normality, often as a result of the monster's destruction, and, at least rhetorically, supports the dominant worldview. Ellis (1994) noted, with regard to adolescents' Ouija rituals,

This kind of face-to-face confrontation with evil has much in common with teens' desire to reach Satan, only to taunt and reject him after confirming traditional religious values. Exorcism subjects supernatural forces to human will, and along the way confirms fundamentalist values. (85)

Horror cinema, then, appears to follow the same functional patterns as Ouija boards for adolescents and Mary Worth games for preadolescents: we have a predictable outcome in a set, bounded narrative that, as frightening as the ride may be, will end in approximately ninety minutes or so. A movie, specifically a *horror* movie, conforms to Klintberg's (1988) "secure and handleable framework" (165) in which the individual hopes to experience as much fear as the cinematic storyteller can deliver. If, as Ellis (1994) noted, such forms of play enact "teens' belief and [allow] them to participate directly in myth" (62), then it is not too far a stretch to conclude that engaging in horror cin-

ema, specifically horror movies about urban legends, allows the audience to engage directly with legend. This engagement is, I argue, a form of ostension.

Candyman and Ostension

Diegetically, Helen experiences two forms of ostensive behavior: the quasi- and the pseudo-ostension. Each of these I will deal with at length. Within the context of the university environment that Helen works in, she comes across another potential informant of the *Candyman* story. It appears that Ruthie-Jean, a resident in the Cabrini Green housing project, which is the geographical focus of the *Candyman* stories, was murdered by *Candyman* himself a few weeks earlier. The residents of the housing project attributed her murder to *Candyman*. Helen's informant, a woman in the janitorial department of the university, tells the story thus:

Kitty: Well, all I know—it was there was some lady, in her tub, and . . . and she heard a noise.

Helen: Do you remember her name?

Kitty: I think her name was Ruthie-Jean. . . . And she heard this banging and smashing like somebody was trying to make a hole in the wall—so Ruthie call 911, and she said somebody coming through the walls. And they didn't believe her.

Henrietta [friend of Kitty's]: They thought the lady was crazy. Right?

Kitty: Mm-hmm. So she called 911 again, and they still didn't believe her. But when they finally got there, she was dead.

Helen: Was she shot?

Kitty: No. Umm, she was killed with a hook. Sch'tz [slicing movement with her hand] Yeah.

Henrietta: It's true. Yeah, it is. I read it in the papers. *Candyman* killed her.

Kitty: Yeah, but . . . uh . . . I [winks at Helen] don't know anything about that [dirty look to Henrietta].

Although this passage closely resembles a collected legend, we have to remember that this was written by Rose, consciously trying to mimic impromptu storytelling. I think the verisimilitude he achieves is impressive despite its not being “authentic” folklore.

In researching the story further, Helen discovers that her own condominium was originally built as a housing project, like Cabrini Green, and that her own apartment's layout mirrors that of Ruthie-Jean's apartment. One particular aspect is that the mirrored medicine cabinet in Helen's bathroom is easily removed and leads directly to the apartment next door. If, as

Helen proposes, Cabrini Green has the same sort of layout as her own building, then what happened to Ruthie-Jean is fully explainable: the killer or killers were in the next apartment and, in coming through the passageway that links the two bathrooms, appeared to be coming right through the mirror. They find Ruthie-Jean and kill her, and the legend continues.

Helen's initial hypothesis about Candyman and by extension who killed Ruthie-Jean is quasi-ostension: "the observer's interpretation of puzzling evidence in terms of narrative tradition" (Ellis 1989, 208). The residents of Cabrini Green believe, a priori, in the Candyman legend, and the events that lead up to the murder of Ruthie-Jean are then seen as proof of that belief: in other words, the cultural source hypothesis I discuss in chapter 5. Discovering folkloristic arguments applied—and applied properly—in a mainstream fiction movie, although exciting for insiders (in this case folklorists), is still no indication of actual knowledge of folkloristic scholarship, despite what I try to argue with regard to *The X-Files*. The use of quasi-ostension is easily explained as an accidental fluke. Any number of movies and television shows explore seemingly paranormal phenomenon but end up giving a rational explanation for the events themselves. It is quite possible that screenwriter and director Rose was following a standard generic cliché and is unaware that quite accidentally he is giving a demonstration of quasi-ostension.

Classical Hollywood narrative, as the industrial norm of feature-length, fictional, narrative cinema, is, not surprisingly, the narrative tradition *Candyman* uses. In the classic narrative tradition, events in the story are organized around a basic structure of enigma and resolution. At the beginning of the story, an event may take place that disrupts a preexisting equilibrium in the fictional world. It is then the task of the narrative to resolve that disruption and set up a new equilibrium. The classic narrative may thus be regarded as a process whereby problems are solved so that order may be restored to the world of the fiction. The "realist" aspects of the classic narrative are overlaid on this basic enigma-resolution structure and typically operate on two levels: first, through the verisimilitude of the fictional world set up by the narrative, and, second, through the inscription of human agency within the process of the narrative (Kuhn 1992).

This interplay of "reality" and quasi-ostension fits neatly into the schema of classical Hollywood narrative: we begin with the enigma that an urban legend is walking around the corridors of a Chicago housing project, and it is believed by the local residents that this legend was responsible for the murder of a local resident. Through "the inscription of human agency," Helen, we are able to resolve the enigma, and Cabrini Green returns to a state of (relative) equilibrium.

The explanation that Helen discovers about who killed Ruthie-Jean and, by extension, the mystery surrounding the Cabrini Green residents' belief in Candyman, while at first appearing to be quasi-ostension, turns out to actually be pseudo-ostension: a local gang lord has taken the name of Candyman, carrying a hook and all, and has been terrorizing the project's residents. Pseudo-ostension is the "imitating [of] the outlines of a known narrative to perpetuate a hoax" (Ellis 1989, 208); knowing the belief traditions of an area allows one, if so inclined, to terrorize that community by exploiting those very traditions. Just as Rose's use of quasi-ostension may in fact be accidental and more the result of generic conventions than academic intent, so too can Rose's use of pseudo-ostension be considered a product of the genre's conventions. After all, how many episodes of *Scooby Doo* ended with a kind of pseudo-ostension, of the revelation that a local legend was exploited by the episode's villain by embodying the ghost or monster through the use of an elaborate costume? The "rational and scientific" explanation of paranormal events is frequently resolved by demonstrating the operation of a pseudo-ostensive activity.

The pseudo-ostension argument, in the context of contemporary narrative filmmaking, can be seen as the logical result of quasi-ostension. If, as film studies would have us accept, classical Hollywood narration is centered on the resolution of a single enigma, then quasi-ostension is perfectly suited to this narrative form. The audience assumes the existence of an alternative explanation to the paranormal one proposed by those who experienced the phenomenon (quasi-ostension), and the logical solution to that enigma (as demanded by classical Hollywood narration) would then be of someone exploiting a supernatural belief tradition in order to perpetrate a hoax (pseudo-ostension). Therefore, the assertion that Rose's *Candyman* intelligently weaves its narrative through a series of contemporary folkloristic arguments (about ostension) does not entirely hold water when taken in context of the industrial mode of Hollywood narrative production. What folklorists could identify as ostension in contemporary Hollywood horror movies is in actuality nothing more than the very conventions Hollywood has always used or, rather, that would be the case if the pseudo-ostensive argument ended the film. It doesn't; it only brings us halfway through the movie.

Dégh (1995) noted that "ostensive action, that is, the showing of an action by showing the action itself or by another action, might be recognized by some people as acting, either in organized (theatrical or other) or casual forms" (239). If so, then those same people should recognize cinema as ostensive, too. In a movie, narrative is not represented (although diegetically it may be, as in the case of the previous *Candyman* story); it is presented. We are not told, "John picked up a knife"; we are shown John picking up a knife.

Let me return to the Candyman narrative cited earlier and break the film down by shots. Excluding the Candyman voice-over and the opening credits of the film, the movie opens in a close-up of Helen's face. She is listening to an unseen woman's voice as the first few words of the previously transcribed narrative are spoken. We are presented with a cut into the diegetically presented narrative. With a sudden and visually jarring technique that violates the Hollywood code of continuity editing, we are in a different narrative space, and we can negotiate this space only with the voice-over narrative we hear. What begins as *representation*, the telling of "the scariest story I've ever heard," becomes a *presentation* of the narrative itself, stylistically returning to the continuity of editing previously violated. Here, Rose is negotiating between two forms of legend telling: that of oral storytelling and that of ostension. As we conclude the voice-over narrative, we have a slow dissolve to a close-up of the young woman telling the story. A cut occurs to a running tape recorder; then a third shot *follows*, showing Helen listening to the storyteller conclude her story. In cinematic terms, we have a violation of the codes of continuity editing; we are not given an establishing shot until the very last line of the woman's narrative. This jarring and self-conscious violation of the codes of classical Hollywood cinema can be seen as further underscoring Rose's understanding of how ostension operates.

However, as Dégh (1995) further argued, "The complete system of theatrical signs maintains this specific duplicity in professional theater (film, television) and continually reminds the audience that what takes place on the stage is not the showing of reality, not presentation, but representation, the imitation of a real or imagined reality" (239). Returning to our current argument, Dégh's position would invalidate what I am trying to assert: for Dégh, cinema, as a theatrical sign, is *representation*, not *presentation*, and therefore cannot be considered ostensive. For Dégh, ostension is the confusion of what Katherine Young called "taleworlds" (quoted in Wyckoff 1993, 3–4) and reality, which would appear to be supported by Ellis in his *focus* almost exclusively on matters of quasi- and pseudo-ostension. If movie audiences confused the presented images with reality and believed all that they saw to be true, they themselves would be operating under a system of quasi-ostension. But as Bordwell and Thompson (1986) noted, for some film theorists, "cinema's power lies in its ability to present a *recognizable* reality" (147, emphasis added). Cinema is an analogue to reality, not its replacement. And when audiences react to fantasy cinema (e.g., horror movies), they react not to a confusion of the presented image with reality but to the presentation of images as cultural discourse.

Like Ellis's Ouija board players and Langlois's and Klintberg's Mary Worth participants, horror movies function as a means to reproduce contemporary

anxieties through a system of presented signs. If, as follows from Dégh, fiction narrative cinema is not the representation of reality but the presentation of reality (and of course it is), how does the ostensive argument fit in, other than that horror movies (in this case) would then be pseudo-ostensive action? The answer lies in the ritual aspect of cinema, a dynamic that horror movies particularly exploit.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Walter Evans (1982) saw the connection between horror movies and ritual, noting that “the adolescent who squirms and perspires his way through a good monster movie participates in an imaginative experience in many ways incredibly close to the complicated and detailed initiatory practices of premodern peoples around the world” (135). Although Evans’s article is more concerned with analogues between the initiation images of “premodern peoples” and horror movie images, he notes that “a powerful experience of such images [as found in horror movies] alone can cause changes in personality and behavior” (141). Evans continued,

Premodern initiates themselves both participate in and sometimes (like their modern counterparts) merely witness ceremonies which scholars characteristically refer to as “dramas” and “scenarios,” representations whose effect and function, so far as is possible to judge, seem to remarkably parallel those of monster movies. (141)

Evans seems to contradict Dégh; it begins to appear that the representation can have a similar effect on the viewer as if the image were actually presented. If that is so—and I firmly believe it to be—then because of the nature of this strong identification with the screen image, representation *functions* as presentation for the horror film audience. Therefore, this identificatory process, albeit contentiously, brings forth an alternative to the quasi- and pseudo-ostension arguments that I am calling “mass-mediated” ostension.

Conclusion

Candyman is a mainstream Hollywood horror film that has captured the attention of a number of folklorists in addition to the legions of the genre’s fans. The reasons for this attention are fairly obvious: the movie is about urban legends; it intelligently engages in many of the current debates that urban legend scholars are engaged in; it is a well-acted, well-produced piece of moviemaking; and it is actually a “scary” horror movie (itself a rarity). But more important, the film engages in the issues surrounding ostension with regard to the film’s diegesis. It also offers up an alternative to the quasi- and

pseudo-ostension arguments that dominate our discipline. Images can have an impact on the human mind with the same intensity as participation in similar activities. That being so, certain forms of representation can have the same individual impact as presentation itself. Comparing the horror film to adolescent rites like playing with a Ouija board or preadolescent rites like Mary Worth games creates an analogue between cinema and ritual; the watching becomes as inclusive as the participating. The difference seems to be, although perhaps one of degree, certainly one of permanence: as Donna Wyckoff (1993) noted, “Participating in the legend process may be a way of doing *something* without doing anything that has overt, permanent consequences” (27). Going to the movies, entertaining though it may be, has larger psychosocial impact with regard to the film’s position within the legend process, and one way that process affects us is ostensive.

Notes

1. Ivo Osolobě (1994) bridges the gap between Augustine and Eco: “For centuries Augustine’s ideas on showing were nearly forgotten, and *Concerning the Teacher* [*De Magistro*] was read almost exclusively as a theological treatise. Only Comenius, also concerned with teaching, made showing one of the most important principles of his didactics. . . . Later the idea of communication by means of things was ridiculed by Swift in the [Lagado Academy] episode of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, however, insisted that proper wisdom is conveyed by things rather than signs” (657). Thanks to Gillian Bennett for pointing me in this direction. See also Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) and Eco (1976).

2. In a later piece, Ellis (2003) noted, “*Pseudo-ostension* involves a hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted: teens often fabricate evidence of cult sacrifices, even to the extent of killing animals and leaving occult symbols behind at the site” (162).

3. It would be interesting to do an ethnographic study of African American audiences to see how they respond to these racialized issues in *Candyman*.

CHAPTER TEN



The Convergence of Folklore, Belief, and Popular Media: The Case of *Most Haunted*

This chapter pulls together a number of the threads I have been outlining in this book; in particular, I am interested in seeing the points of convergence in marrying folkloristic approaches to supernatural belief traditions, with an exceptionally popular British-based reality TV show *Most Haunted* (Living TV, 2002 to present). As I have been arguing throughout, such an approach cannot simply look for evidence of traditional supernatural belief in a television show; such motif spotting does little to illuminate how folklore and popular media converge in the early part of the twenty-first century. Without necessarily using the word, throughout this book I have been discussing *convergence*, here understood to be the coming together of two different cultural phenomena, in this case, folkloric supernatural belief traditions and popular-culture texts (film and television shows). While both the folklore of (and about) ghosts and television are independent studies, each with its own academic traditions, I want to see what happens when those two studies converge. In order to study this convergence, I am again using an ostensive methodology, looking at how a television series like *Most Haunted* can be considered to be a form of ostension. The televisual text functions like a traditional legend teller, creating a complex, matrixlike relationship among the supernatural belief traditions, the television show, and those watching that show. Linda Dégh (2001) likewise recognized—albeit in passing—the role that television programs about the supernatural play as legend tellers. It is this role that I hope to flesh out more later.

In this chapter, I make a number of claims about audiences and their beliefs and hypothesize a range of their responses. Of course, audiences for a show like *Most Haunted* need to be properly studied, so any generalization or hypothesis I can make about their actual behavior is pure speculation. But sometimes such speculations are important to make provisionally before further research is conducted. What we do know, apart from the significant viewing figures for the show and the tremendous demand for tickets for the *Most Haunted Live* broadcasts, is more anecdotal but does point toward some further areas of exploration. Richard Woolfe, the director of television programming at LivingTV, noted:

We've since found out that loads of fans [of *Most Haunted*] have rituals attached to the way they watch the show; they turn off the lights, close the curtains, some burn candles and others set tape recorders running in case there's any EVP [electronic voice phenomenon—ostensive action to be sure]. We also discovered that lots of people are getting together to watch the shows, even holding *Most Haunted* parties. (quoted in Fielding, Acorah, and Paul 2005, 14)

While there is no concrete proof that the veracity of the presented phenomena is actually discussed during these get-togethers, I can confirm, from my own viewing experiences, that watching this show with other people elicits comments on the show's veracity more than does the joint viewing of any other television program I have watched. Most of these comments involve the outright skepticism of Derek Acorah's abilities as a medium, particularly his alleged spirit possessions.

Most Haunted, in addition to being *about* the folklore of the supernatural and the ostensive presentation of such phenomena, is in itself a kind of televised "legend trip." Legend trips involve, as is semantically obvious, traveling to a specific location attached to a legend in the hopes of witnessing some kind of phenomena *as if in the legend itself*. Such journeys clearly mark themselves as, in Ellis's (1989) phrase, "ostension itself" (208). Carl Lindahl (2005) noted, "Such legend quests constitute a sort of *ostensive play*, an improvised drama in which the players, visiting the site of a haunting or the scene of a crime, . . . both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative" (165). There are at least two issues related to legend tripping that are relevant here. On the one hand, each new legend trip adds—through ostension—to the narrative core attached to the location by engaging and replicating the legend itself. Much like graffiti, a truly terrifying encounter at a legend site ensures a kind of legendary immortality to the trippers.

The other issue is more implicit. By engaging in ostensive play, particularly around a historic site, legend trippers are also exploring their local his-

tory through reenactment. Although legend tripping tends to be an adolescent activity—and any pedagogical significance to such activities would likely be met with scorn—Linda Dégh (2001) did note the following:

It is remarkable that the young are so curious about the past, and the houses and other sites [for legend tripping] that do not exist anymore. They go on fear-some expeditions to check-points—broken-down railroad bridges, grave markers, chapels, tunnels. On their daring trips to the unknown spirit underground, they challenge the dead to appear and tell how they perished. (327)

While certainly the prime directive of legend tripping is to have a “scary experience,” such experiences also bring their own local history to life, whether in the form of communication with the spirit world (in a kind of “unliving” history) or through a concrete and tactile experience of the space. Michel de Certeau recognized that

legends about places humanize physical spaces and lay claim to territory regardless of legal ownership or official nomenclature. They alter the identity of a place and make it habitable, associating with it a history linking past with present and rejecting scientific knowledge and political authority. (quoted in Motz 1998, 342; see also de Certeau 1984, 105–26)

In many respects, the investigations by the *Most Haunted* team do exactly that: assuming a belief in the supernatural, the team’s encounter with the location’s ghosts reveals a vernacular history of experience pertaining to that locale. Or, assuming a mantle of skepticism, particularly through the use of night-vision cameras, the team experiences historical properties without the aid of electric lights, thereby re-creating an experiential analogy of living conditions of the past.

Returning to Bill Ellis’s work on the legend trip, clearly the primary intention of such undertakings is to have a fright, either through what Dégh has called the “general scary condition” (quoted in Hall 1973, 172) of the location itself or through actual contact with spirits. However, as Ellis (1981) has noted, there is a significant ambivalence in the experience:

[The legend trip] thus plays with an ambiguous response, neither skepticism nor terror, but one similar to what Goffman [in *Frame Analysis*] has termed “being engrossed.” Crucial to such a response, he argues, “is not an individual’s sense of what is real, but rather what it is he can get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by; and this can be something he can claim is really going on and yet claim is not real.” (495)

This ambivalence (rather than “ambiguity,” the term Ellis uses) toward the legend trip (as ostension) recognizes the ambivalence of the legend genre itself, which encourages neither belief nor disbelief, as essentialist categories, but rather a metatextual debate about whether such events are *possible*. During a legend trip, while the supernatural experience may feel “real,” the immediate supernatural explanation for the experience may not hold water. As I demonstrate later, each episode of *Most Haunted* is structured like a classic legend trip, including a buildup of tension and anxiety through the telling of spooky stories attached to the location, the evocation of the spirits themselves, and finally a discussion about the experience from the safe distance of the next morning (Ellis 1981).

Reality TV and the Supernatural

Most Haunted debuted in 2002 on LivingTV, a British-based satellite and cable channel. While LivingTV is known in the United Kingdom for broadcasting a number of high-profile American television shows, it has also developed a reputation for showing a number of paranormal and supernatural reality series from around the world, including *Most Haunted*. *Most Haunted* has been surprisingly successful, with viewing figures in the millions. According to the production team, each new episode has approximately 1 million viewers, whereas their live broadcasts, *Most Haunted Live*, are known to bring in viewing figures in excess of 5 million (Fielding et al. 2005).¹

Most Haunted falls within the category of “reality TV” (see Hill 2005). More specifically, it belongs to a subgenre pervasive enough to warrant a name of its own: “supernatural reality TV,” wherein a team of investigators travels around the country to investigate sites of purported supernatural occurrences.² The *Most Haunted* team is led by former children’s television presenter Yvette Fielding and is supported by a number of experts, including a historian (Richard Felix), a parapsychologist, and at least one psychic medium. These four investigators fulfill very specific roles in the investigation: the medium’s presence is to facilitate contact with any spirits or ghosts at the location; Felix, as the show’s resident historian, is present to verify any historical information generated by the medium, and the parapsychologist is present to ensure as “scientific” an investigation into the purported haunted site as possible and to attempt to debunk any immediate claims that the phenomena experienced are paranormal. Fielding’s role, as leader of the investigation, is metaphorically mediumistic: while the team’s *psychic* medium is present to act as a channel between our material world and the world of spirits, Fielding, as the show’s host, is the medium between the on-screen inves-

tigation and the television audience's experience of that investigation. She is present and is presented as our guide to the specific investigation. However, and what for me makes *Most Haunted* unique in this subgenre, is the on-screen presence of the entire technical crew during these investigations. The makeup artist, lighting rigger, cinematographer, sound engineer, and producer all take part in the investigation, and there is no attempt to hide their presence. This inclusion of the crew was consciously part of the show's design. "Right from the start, Karl [Beattie, the show's producer] wanted to produce a show that was a serious investigation, and he wanted it to be about a group of people rather than one or two 'stars'" (Fielding et al. 2005, 2).

Most Haunted is a different kind of supernatural reality TV show to the majority of the subgenre. While it is supernatural reality TV, there is no financial reward for surviving the night in the haunted house, nor are the on-screen presenters "contestants" in some kind of competition as in the "reality game shows" such as *Fear* (MTV, 2000–2002), despite it, too, being "supernatural reality TV" (Hill 2005, 31).³ Nor is the focus of the series on the lives and everyday experiences of the investigators themselves, such as *Ghost Hunters* (Sci-Fi, 2004 to present) which is not only "supernatural reality TV", but also a "docu-soap" (Hill 2005, 27). Despite not being a docu-soap, frequent watching of *Most Haunted* does permit a sense of "getting to know" the crew of the show and develops a sense of continuity between investigations. For example, Stuart Torvell, the series lighting rigger, tends to get the brunt of most poltergeist attacks, creating some empathy for Torvell and an almost comic anticipation of what the spirit world will literally throw in his direction this week. And while *Most Haunted* is "investigative," unlike the "tabloid TV" shows (Hill 2005, 24), in each episode a separate investigation is *shown* (presented), not *described* after the fact (represented), which, as I note in the previous chapter, is indicative of ostension.

Most Haunted is thus unique in this subgenre of reality TV in revealing the investigative processes of the series. By avoiding the conventions of continuity television, whereby the means of graphic construction are supposedly hidden from the viewer, *Most Haunted* privileges this construction as part of the series. When paranormal phenomena are encountered during an investigation, we are aware of who was present during the encounter because of this disruption of classical codes of continuity. There is no question of who is holding the camera, as the entire crew present is seen on-screen. In the related Canadian series *The Girly Ghosthunters* (Space, 2004), where a team of four young Canadian women investigate supernatural locations throughout Ontario, the camera and sound operators are ignored, and, for example, when some anomalous noise is encountered, the "girls" ask each

other if they are the source of that sound. In *The Girly Ghosthunters*, the possibility of another member of the crew accidentally (or even deliberately) being the source for seemingly anomalous sound is never addressed because the series' crew is never recognized as being present. This may seem a minor quibble, but the failure to recognize that *someone* is holding the camera and following the girls around, undermines the series' claims regarding the veracity of the investigation. *Most Haunted*, however, by recognizing everyone who is present when phenomena are experienced, supports the investigative truth claims the show is attempting to demonstrate, namely, the existence of the supernatural.

Most Haunted

Most Haunted, as an investigation into the supernatural, requires a strict mandate under which to operate. Put succinctly, what footage the team captures on the night of the investigation is what will be broadcast on the show. The entire show is predicated upon an assurance to the audience that there will be no fakery involved. If the team is unable to capture any paranormal events while on location, then when that episode is broadcast, no paranormal event will be shown. Even before the show was commissioned by LivingTV, the “no fakery” rule was in place:

Straight away there was interest [in producing the show], but [Beattie and Fielding] were taken aback by the broadcasters who wanted them to fake some of the activity. “What if nothing happens?” commissioning editors asked. “It’s going to be a very boring show.” One major broadcaster was ready to sign it up if they would fake a few special effects, then come clean at the end of the show—as Derren Brown was later to do in a one-off special for Channel 4. But Karl and Yvette stood their ground, insisting that even if nothing happened on the night, it would still be interesting to watch the team dealing with their emotions and the “scare factor.” The shows where there was no discernable activity would give them a chance to explain to viewers how a paranormal investigation works and what phenomena have to be discounted. Their goal, right from the start, was to conduct a balanced investigation into paranormal activity to try to find out once and for all whether ghosts do exist—and, if they do, what they are. (Fielding et al. 2005, 4)

Detractors of *Most Haunted*, when not discounting the possibility of the existence of ghosts outright, often criticize the show for being the duller program on the air; each investigation begins with much anticipation for the evening, but often little is actually delivered in the form of observable para-

normal phenomena. Yet that response misses what the show's producers intended, which was a reality TV series about the processes of paranormal investigation, including their banality.

Mandates, however, are meant to be, if not broken, perhaps bent a little. *Most Haunted* has received more than its fair share of criticism regarding the veracity of its truth claims, including several complaints lodged with the media watchdog Ofcom. I deal with the Ofcom investigation later, but this controversy needs to be noted in passing first. Most of the criticisms of the show are focused primarily on the show's main psychic medium, Derek Acorah, whose role I discuss in more detail in the course of this chapter, including the controversies surrounding his alleged mediumship. It should be noted here, though, that the entire show is affected by these criticisms of Acorah. Such criticisms may challenge the veracity of a single aspect of the show's "truth claims," but this does not actually challenge the more presentational evidence in the investigations. Of course, by watching *Most Haunted*, we are invited to question the veracity of *any* of the evidence presented, including that of the show's psychics. And as I have been arguing throughout this book, such debates are the very nature of legend storytelling. However, as ostension, we need to distinguish between representational and presentational evidence; that is, the evidence produced by Acorah (or any of the psychic mediums) is representational, and we have only their word to go by. *Most Haunted* at its most compelling also occasionally offers more presentational evidence when the show enters the realm of the ostensive.

Each episode of *Most Haunted* follows a standard format, and, as I note previously, these episodes largely follow the structure of an adolescent legend trip. Although discussing the "mock ordeal" at American summer camps, Bill Ellis's (1981) description in comparison with legend tripping seems to anticipate *Most Haunted*: "Like the legend-trip, they begin with accounts of past happenings, journey into uncanny territory, contact with the supernatural, and conclude with intense discussion" (489). Each episode begins with a twenty-four-second "teaser" opening. This teaser features a voice-over from Yvette Fielding and gives a brief précis of the *kinds* of experiences the episode will feature, that is, poltergeist activity, orbs, and raps. The images are desaturated into monochrome and decontextualized through the editing into a montage of close-ups of the team's faces as they scream and generally look terrified. This teaser flows into the standard opening credit sequence, with spooky electronic theme music and similarly edited images. However, this opening credit montage is drawn from all previous seasons of the show, including the current one (the entire season is shot, edited, and packaged mostly before the episodes are broadcast).

The individual episode begins properly with Fielding introducing the location and giving a potted history of the site. This section of each show runs for approximately five to six minutes and includes very standard documentary-style talking-heads footage mixed with wider establishing shots of Fielding walking through the space, thereby demonstrating the physical context of the location. Often the show's historian, Richard Felix, is presented in the role of storyteller, giving the grisly details of the events that are supposed to have occurred at this location (often, these stories are, if not actual legends, certainly presented as legendlike). In addition—and this is particularly relevant for folklorists watching the series—memorates are told by those who have themselves encountered supernatural phenomena at that location. While it is certainly possible that such memorates are examples of proto-ostension, the telling of legends as personal experience narratives (see Ellis 2003, 163), there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the storytellers in the show. Interspersed within this section of each episode, however, are tiny reconstructions of paranormal phenomena, often filmed in monochrome (in order to distinguish these reconstructions from the full-color videography of Fielding wandering the premises telling the stories attached to the place). These reconstructions also feature eerie music and sound effects and sped-up action not only to highlight the reconstructedness of the sequence but also to further mystify the location.

For example, during this introductory sequence in the season 2 opener, “Brannigan’s Nightclub, Manchester” (originally broadcast on April 8, 2003), Fielding is recounting how staff and patrons at Brannigan’s will feel “an unseen presence” while descending the stairs toward the basement. To demonstrate (*present*, by any other word) visually something “unseen” requires a dense videographic construction. To deconstruct how such an effect is produced, a detailed shot-by-shot analysis is required. While Fielding is relating this part of the story, additional lighting for the show has been added, casting bright green and red light on the walls, giving an added eeriness to this documentary footage, while also underlining its artificiality. At one point while descending these stairs, Fielding breaks off her narration for an inserted “reconstructed” shot: filmed as a monochrome renegativized image (giving the illusion that the image is a negative and perhaps reflecting the negative connotations of this violent spirit) and with the action highly sped up, a young man descends the stairs, moves toward the camera, and then disappears. But just before the image disappears and we return to Fielding’s narration, the “presence” shakes its head very rapidly with a rattling noise on the soundtrack. We return to Fielding, who notes that some people descending these stairs are actually pushed by persons unknown or unseen. This is immediately

followed by more reconstructed footage: the empty stairwell (with red and green lights still visible), the ghostly figure (still in monochrome and negative) halfway down the stairs making a pushing movement with his hand and then jump-cutting further down the stairs to do another sped-up head shake, a slow-motion shot of a man descending the stairs (we know this second man is “human” because the color has returned and the image is no longer in negative), a quick cut back to the negative spirit pushing out with both hands, and then a return to the “human” looking around to see who pushed him as he continues down the stairs. There are two more insert shots of the negative spirit still present doing his sped-up head shake. Visually, at no point do these two figures occupy the screen at the same time (they may in fact be played by the same person), but the effect is one of causality—that the “negative spirit” pushed the other man. This lengthy description of this sequence does not do it justice: not that this is a brilliant example of television artistry, but this entire sequence on the steps, including Fielding’s narration, runs for only twenty-four seconds. The artificial lighting, the use of renegativized monochrome, the slowed-down and sped-up action are all technical tricks that underline the artificiality of this section of the episode. This entire section is much in keeping with the kind of tabloid TV style of other supernatural reality TV shows like *Scariest Places on Earth* (ABC Family, 2000–2004); we are told spooky stories—sometimes as memorates, sometimes as legend—and offered visual reconstructions that give a “horror movie” quality to the location.

In many respects, beyond following in the tradition of tabloid TV shows, this introductory section of each *Most Haunted* episode functions to key the television audience to interpret the forthcoming phenomena within the context of the narratives just related. If we see each episode as a televised legend trip, this section conforms to what Gary Hall (1973) noted regarding the telling of scary stories prior to such adolescent adventures:

As important as form is in legend-telling, the “legend atmosphere” or “general scary condition” is just as crucial to the effectiveness of this type of narrative. More specifically, the “scariness” of the legend-trip is a result of: (1) the foreboding appearance of the legend site, (2) legend-telling, and (3) the atmosphere of tension and uncertainty generated by the trip. During the legend-trip, in fact, the young people cultivate an atmosphere of fear; they try to frighten one another; they seek out contact with the supernatural and attendant dangers. (170)

The highly artificial legend and memorate section of each *Most Haunted* episode is more than just contrived television. It creates this “general scary condition” in the location prior to the investigation proper. In terms of quasi-ostension, by beginning the investigation in the tradition associated with the

location being investigated, any phenomena, natural or supernatural, encountered during the night will be interpreted from the perspective of that legend tradition. This section of the episode, then, primes the belief pump as it were.

The first part of an episode's investigation begins with a psychic walkabout: the show's psychic or psychics are filmed touring the site, in normal videographic style, and picking up on any residual or grounded spirit information. These sequences tend to run for approximately fifteen minutes and so make up a considerable amount of on-screen time. The psychics' role on the show is highly liminal; they are, after all, the literal "medium" through which the initial contact with the spirit world is made. In terms of the ostension arguments, the mediums are additionally liminal in that their role is both presentational and representational. While in the introductory "legendmemorate" section of an episode all the information presented is representational (i.e., told to us), the psychic walkabouts are both representational, as we are *told* what information they are receiving, and presentational, as we *see* them receiving this information from the spirits. When the psychic mediums receive concrete names and historical information about the spirits or about the location, on-screen displays confirm (or occasionally note as inconclusive) the evidence the medium has offered. For example, again from the "Brannigan's Nightclub" episode, Acorah "sees" piles of bodies in the church part of what is now the nightclub (the location used to be a Methodist church). Acorah senses that these dead people did not die on the site itself but were killed not too far away and brought to the present location. On-screen, the following information is confirmed by the *Most Haunted* team in postproduction: "Battle of Peterloo: On 16 August 1819 the townsfolk demonstrated over tax rises. Eleven people were slaughtered by soldiers." While we only have Acorah's word that he picked up this information from the spirit world (representation), we see him apparently in the process of picking up that information (presentation).

This presentation/representation duality of the psychic medium's role is particularly acute with regard to possession. Out of all the psychic mediums the show has utilized over the various episodes (at the time of writing, season 8 has just concluded, and the team has conducted over a hundred investigations), only Derek Acorah seemed to get properly possessed by spirits. In the second episode of the first season, "Chillingham Castle" (originally broadcast on June 4, 2002), during the psychic walkabout, Acorah picks up the impression of the body of a young boy believed to have been intentionally walled up inside a chimney (remains were found during renovations in the twentieth century). In the middle of his sentence describing what he

claims are the boy's feelings while being interred, his voice rises into a child-like wail, and the pronouns of the account shift from the third to the first person. This transformation is sufficiently odd that Fielding and parapsychologist Jason Karl are startled. Karl brings his electromagnetic field (EMF) recorder toward Acorah to ascertain if there are any changes in the medium's EMF readings (supposedly an indication of spirit presence). Veracity in these sequences across all the *Most Haunted* episodes is predicated upon the belief in the medium himself. If we believe that Acorah is possessed, in this case by Chillingham's legendary "Blue Boy" ghost, then such moments are presentational. If, however, we question Acorah's abilities to either channel spirits or receive information from them, then such accounts are at best representational (and at worst clearly fraudulent if Acorah is faking). Other psychics tend to resist possession, notably David Wells, who, since season 7, has been the show's primary psychic medium. Acorah seemed almost to welcome it. Spirit possession is where the purported spirit uses the medium's voicebox and body to communicate to the other investigators. Again, we see the medium's physical stance change and clearly hear changes in his voice. However, such "evidence" for spirit communication is still ultimately representational, as we only have hearsay that such possession is actually happening.

Acorah was the show's main psychic from its inception until season 7 (2005), when he was given his own series on LivingTV, *Derek Acorah's Ghost Towns* (LivingTV, 2005 to present). He left *Most Haunted* just before Hallowe'en in 2005, coinciding with the live broadcast of *Most Haunted Live* across four nights, beginning on October 28 and ending on Hallowe'en, which took place at various locations in London's East End on the trail of Jack the Ripper. On the first of these four nights, in an interview with the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror*, *Most Haunted*'s current parapsychologist, Ciarán O'Keefe, intimated that Acorah was a fraud. In the *Mirror* piece, O'Keefe is quoted as intentionally suggesting misinformation to see if Acorah would pick up on it:

While on a shoot at Bodmin gaol [O'Keefe] invented a long-dead South African jailer called Kreed Kafer—an anagram of Derek Faker.

I wrote the name down and asked another member of the crew to mention it to Derek before filming.

I honestly didn't think Derek would take the bait. But during the filming he actually got possessed by my fictional character! (quoted in Roper 2005, n.p.)

O'Keefe conducted other similar tests of Acorah's veracity, all of which the famed psychic failed. O'Keefe still is the main parapsychologist on *Most Haunted*, and Acorah had already been given his own show on LivingTV

(which was not canceled after the piece in *The Mirror* was printed). There appears to be a better working relationship between O’Keefe and the show’s current primary psychic medium, David Wells. In terms of performance style, Wells is more subtle and fully admits, on the show, his own hesitation at definite conclusions from the spirit world, especially when such information could be deduced from the existing surroundings. In addition, as noted previously, Wells does not tend to allow himself to be possessed. In the wake of Acorah’s flamboyant style (particularly when possessed), Wells’s more subtle performance appears to encourage greater confidence in the medium’s truth claims. Nevertheless, whether with Wells or Acorah, the phenomenon of purported contact with the spirit world through a psychic medium remains ostensibly liminal, that is, both presentational and representational.

Séances, which feature in most *Most Haunted* episodes, are problematic from the point of view of ostension: the phenomenon presented is as it apparently was on the night of filming. What we are actually looking at is left ambiguous, however. In an article published in the *British Journal of Psychology*, Richard Wiseman, Emma Greening, and Matthew Smith (2003) (Smith has regularly appeared on *Most Haunted* and *Most Haunted Live* as a parapsychologist) noted the significance of suggestion in séances. In two controlled experiments, the researchers conducted “fake séances,” led by an actor, and then followed up with two questionnaires for the participants. The results, not surprisingly, confirmed the researchers’ initial assumptions regarding the “impact . . . suggestion [has] on the reliability of eyewitness for séance phenomena” (286):

Approximately 31 percent of participants reported that the table had moved during the séance, compared with only 10 percent reporting that the handbell had moved. This indicates that the actor’s suggestions had considerable impact on participants’ testimony and supports the notion that verbal suggestion can be used to deceive sitters into reporting the movement of objects that, in reality, remained stationary during the séance. (289–90)

This is not the place to discuss the ethical considerations of Wiseman and his students’ research, of perpetuating deception on unsuspecting believers in paranormal phenomena.⁴ *Most Haunted* gives the parapsychologist a better platform from which to investigate: instead of intentionally faked séances, the show offers continuous opportunities for authentic parapsychological research in a field situation. That said, the conclusions of Wiseman and his colleagues hold up on *Most Haunted* insofar as many of the phenomena documented during these séances are—like the role of psychic mediums—both presentational (we are witnessing the séance itself) and representational (the

phenomenon occurring is usually subjective, and we only have the participants' word for what is happening). There have been moments on the show, however, when a table has levitated during these séances, and this experience is captured on film. I discuss concrete examples of these phenomena later.

After the psychic walkabouts, the crew splits up into smaller groups, switches the cameras to night vision (a way of filming in exceptionally low lighting conditions through an infrared process that gives *Most Haunted's* videographic style that distinctive eerie green glow), and attempts to document paranormal phenomena. These groups engage in a variety of activities intended to attract spirits, including vigils, where small groups sit quietly in a room and wait for something to happen; "calling out," where a small group calls out to the spirits in the room to come and "show themselves" with video cameras at the ready in night vision; and more traditional séances with Ouija boards. In these smaller groups, the entire construction of the sequences is revealed. We know who is in the room wherever phenomena are recorded, as there is no hidden technical crew. Because of this, the crew of *Most Haunted* have become as "famous" as the core group of investigators. When demonstrable phenomena are captured on tape—either audibly in the case of raps and voices or visually in the case of orbs, shadows, or flying spoons—the footage is often replayed several times to ensure that (1) often subtle phenomena are witnessed by the audience and (2) the conceit of the veracity of the investigation is supported by repeated demonstration of the paranormal phenomena.

Other kinds of evidence documented during this section of the program include more inchoate phenomena, like "feelings" or impressions, such as discovering cold spots or feeling sick or aggressive. Where the more material phenomena noted previously are presentational, changes in mood or personality, like possession, are verifiable only by "trust" in the presenters. We only have Fielding's word that she is feeling sick or discovered a cold spot or that producer Karl Beattie's aggressiveness is "out of character." Ciarán O'Keefe's experience of cold or hot spots is more demonstrable and, therefore, more ostensive, as part of his technical equipment is a digital thermometer. Rather than just take his word that the thermometer has verified a cold spot, for example, one of the camera operators will film the digital display registering the change in temperature.

To give a more concrete example of the kind of observable phenomena that can be considered ostensive, I will consider two sequences from the second of the "Queen Mary" episodes (originally broadcast on July 26, 2005), of the team's investigation aboard the ship of the same name. The first sequence

involves Jon Gilbert, the soundman for the show. While the team is moving to a new location aboard the ship, Gilbert stops as if he has seen something; the team questions him, and he describes a woman sitting on the edge of the swimming pool in a white bathing suit. Gilbert's immediate response is less one of fear and more one of concern that there is a woman wandering around where they are filming, at first not recalling that there has been no water in that pool for decades. The investigation team hurries over to the pool, and the second sequence picks up as Derek Acorah confirms that recently a spirit woman has come out of the swimming pool and that he has had the impression of her shaking the water from her hair. Although the pool is dry, there is a very clear large wet patch right at its edge and footprints leading away. To rule out old stains, the camera lingers on this phenomenon sufficiently long enough to demonstrate that these "wet patches" are in fact drying and disappearing. Gilbert's initial sighting of the bather is largely representational; we have only his word that he saw what he saw, although if his reaction was contrived, his acting ability is impressive. The investigation of the wet patches is, however, presentational and ostensive; in addition to the footage of Acorah describing the spirit woman emerging from the empty pool, the floor is clearly wet, and the footprints are visible. Of course, despite the visual phenomena, it could be argued that this was a hoax: water was somehow splashed beside the empty pool, and one of the crew members made the footprints. Such would be a totally plausible explanation; however, the *possibility* that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily, makes this incident legendary, and this phenomenon is *presented* for us, making the event ostensive.

Another kind of physical and ostensive presentation of supernatural phenomena on *Most Haunted* is the "trigger object test." In such a test, an object is left in a room and filmed continuously with a stationary camera. The room is vacated and locked. The investigators return an hour or two later to see if the object has moved. If so, the tape is reviewed carefully to see if this movement was captured on film. Again, as with all the show's evidence, one needs to trust that between the room being secured and the team's return, no one has tampered with the trigger objects or with the videotape in postproduction. Stationary cameras are also sometimes used in séance sequences in order to document a larger contextual phenomenon, like table tipping, where it needs to be demonstrated that no one's knees could have been doing the lifting.

Perhaps the most famous of *Most Haunted's* trigger object tests occurred in their first season at the "Derby Gaol" (originally broadcast on August 27, 2002). Parapsychologist Jason Karl set up a large crucifix in one of the cells on a piece of paper, traced around the cross with a pen, and then locked the cell door. He

joined the crew for dinner, and when he returned, the cross had clearly moved several millimeters from its original position. In reviewing the footage from the video camera that had been set up to record if anything happened in the cell, one can clearly see the paper flutter and suddenly jerk back. As the team beams, it is unfortunate that the framing of that locked-off shot was not entirely successful: because the image was framed so tightly, the edge of the paper was out of shot, so it is possible that it was pulled by human rather than spirit hands.

In using locked-off cameras for séances, there is a compelling moment at “Bodelwyddan Castle” (season 5, originally broadcast on November 30, 2004); historian Richard Felix, producer Karl Beattie, and lighting rigger Stuart Torvell are conducting a séance in the basement of the castle. They have had some tremendous success with table tipping and had stopped just for a moment to regroup their thoughts. Beattie and Felix had their fingertips on the table, and Torvell sat down between them. Just as his fingers touched the edge, the table leaped a good two or three feet to the right. This kind of evidence, demonstrated by locked-off and stationary cameras, presents the paranormal phenomenon in a largely unmediated way. Of course, the entire show is mediated, as it is on television, but the footage itself does not appear to have been tampered with. It is always possible that some kind of stage effect had been rigged up in order to perpetuate a fraud, but as with the wet spots on the *Queen Mary*, entertaining “the possible,” even if ultimately discounted, is part and parcel of legend telling.

Each episode ends with a kind of epilogue in which the crew members recall their favorite moments of the previous night’s investigation in the literal cold light of the next morning. The role of the parapsychologist comes particularly into play here. Despite the frequent inclusion of a parapsychologist during the investigation, during this short, two- or three-minute epilogue, the parapsychologist attempts to find natural explanations for some of the events. In the wake of the article in *The Mirror* quoted previously, O’Keefe (2005) responded on his personal website to a disreputable tabloid newspaper taking some of his comments out of context: “With regards to paranormal phenomena, and mediumship in particular, I am a true skeptic. What that means is that I do not pretend to know the truth: though I continually question the veracity of [a variety of paranormal] claims” (n.p.). O’Keefe’s role as potential debunker of the phenomena experienced on the show is therefore essential not only to the show’s potential truth claims about proving the existence of the supernatural but also, more important for the purposes of this chapter, for keeping the phenomena in the realm of legend by maintaining that sense of doubt

as well as belief. In a more recent episode of *Most Haunted*, an investigation at “Mains Hall” (season 7, originally broadcast on December 6, 2005), Beattie and Torvell are keeping vigil in the attic while the rest of the team is conducting a séance in another part of the hall. What looks, at first, like a large dusty cobweb floats down quickly past Beattie’s camera, much to his surprise, and a stream of frightened obscenities follows. As an investigator, Beattie’s response is to bring the camera down, following the trajectory of this apparition; had it been a thick cobweb, it would have been observable on the floor. Furthermore, no other similar cobwebs could be seen in the recently renovated attic. Analysis was conducted on this particular piece of remarkable footage, including flipping the image left and right, forward and backward. At the end of the episode, even the usually cynical O’Keefe, despite trying to discount the footage as cobwebs, outside lights, and reflections in the camera, remains “at a loss for an explanation.”

Ofcom, Televisuality, and Ostension

Ofcom, the media regulator in the United Kingdom, has received many complaints regarding *Most Haunted*. According to the *Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin* report that found the show “not in breach” of the Broadcasting Code, the complaints fell into three main areas: (1) that the show “was fraudulent practice,” (2) that “viewers were being deceived into thinking the events depicted were real,” and (3) that “there could be potential harm to susceptible or vulnerable viewers as a result” (Ofcom 2005, n.p.). The report makes for fascinating reading, particularly for a folklorist. First, Ofcom refused to comment on the nature of the show, noting that it was not the regulator’s job to police nonnormative belief traditions: “It is not Ofcom’s role to decide whether paranormal activity exists, nor to promote or dismiss belief in the paranormal. Our role is to assess programmes such as *Most Haunted*/*Most Haunted Live* against the provisions of our Code” (n.p.). Significantly, *Most Haunted* is broadcast on LivingTV, which Ofcom recognizes as “an entertainment channel,” whose programs must all be seen in the contextual light of such a channel (n.p.). It fell to Ofcom to ascertain whether *Most Haunted* was “entertainment” or “investigative.” Because the show is broadcast on an entertainment channel, Ofcom concluded that *Most Haunted* constituted more entertainment than investigation and was therefore not in breach of the Broadcasting Code. With particular attention to *Most Haunted Live*, the regulator identified the following indicators of “en-

tainment”: (1) “a celebrity presenter in the studio,” (2) “a studio audience,” (3) “‘over-dramatic’ responses by the presenters and production team to the events which occur,” (4) “paranormal events occurring with regularity,” and (5) “phone-ins” (n.p.). Furthermore, Ofcom noted that “along with the graphics, music, and night-vision camera sequences, all suggested a high degree of showmanship that puts it beyond what we believe to be a generally accepted understanding of what comprises a legitimate investigation” (n.p.). Ofcom’s conclusions do not actually address the charges against the show—accusations of fraud, deception, and potential harm to “susceptible or vulnerable viewers.” However, implicit in Ofcom’s report are suggestions, counter to its own mandate of impartiality, that the charges of fraud against *Most Haunted* are moot since “investigating” the supernatural is a contradiction in terms—one cannot investigate what does not exist. And if the supernatural *did* exist, such an investigation would not appear on LivingTV, an “entertainment” channel. In other words, Ofcom use a veiled critique of the show’s form in order to avoid an explicit criticism of its content; contemporary news and current affairs shows frequently use similar videographic excesses but are considered no less “investigative” because of a greater acceptance of the topics being investigated, at least by the “cultural authorities.”

But what of the form and style in *Most Haunted*? To examine *Most Haunted*’s “excessive videographic style,” which is characteristic of reality TV, the discussion must be recontextualized within the context of television studies. Caldwell (1995) identified an increasing emphasis on American television style beginning in the 1980s. *Most Haunted*, under the rubric of reality TV, emerges out of this tradition of television production. Caldwell characterized contemporary television aesthetics as the search for “excessive style” (3). “Programs battle for identifiable style-markers and distinct looks in order to gain audience share within the competitive broadcast flow” (5). This search for excess and unique style has manifested itself in two main and differing ways: through the adoption of more “cinematic” or “videographic” styles (12). These videographic-intensive shows are exemplified by the early reality TV series that Annette Hill (2005) has noted (see also Caldwell 1995, 13). *Most Haunted* is distinctly working within this tradition of “videographic exhibitionism,” which characterized early reality TV (Caldwell 1995, 13). Following on from Hill, all the examples of videographic exhibitionism in terms of the excesses of visual style in these shows tend to fall within the nonfiction genres of news and current affairs. While fictional drama series were embracing the more cinematic styles of Hollywood continuity and, thereby, increasing their stylized “realism,” news and current

affairs shows were increasingly more videographic in style, thereby increasing the shows' artificiality, at least at the level of televisuality.

Returning now to a consideration of *Most Haunted*, placing it within the televisual tradition of reality TV, those elements of excessive style (the graphics, music, and night-vision camera sequences) that Ofcom identified as indicators of "entertainment" television are just extensions of existing paradigms of nonfiction representation on television. Part of *Most Haunted's* videographic exhibitionism is the laying bare of its own construction wherein the cameras, cables, and sound equipment are often in-shot and the show's crew members become central characters in the investigation, resulting in postmodern reflexivity and self-referentiality. I would argue that the night-vision cinematography, which Ofcom specifically noted as detrimental to the show's truth claims, *increases* the show's veracity by demystifying the investigative methods, techniques, and videographic excesses in a way that other ghost-hunting reality TV shows do not.

Bringing the arguments of ostension back into play here, Dégh and Vázsonyi would not have considered film or television use of legend materials as ostensive. Dégh (1995) noted that

the complete system of theatrical signs maintains this specific duplicity in professional theatre (film, television) and continually reminds the audience that what takes place on the stage is not the showing of reality, not the presentation, but representation, the imitation of a real or imagined reality. (239)

Of course, Dégh and Vázsonyi were writing in a period before reality TV and are here referring to fictionalized dramatizations of legend materials. I would disagree that dramatized legend texts on film or television are not ostensive, hence my coining of the term *mass-mediated ostension* to address this issue in chapter 9. The premise of Dégh and Vázsonyi's argument, however, is that awareness of the theatrical conventions or, in this context, the laying bare of *Most Haunted's* televisual construction denies the possibility of ostensive veracity. In this regard, Dégh and Vázsonyi are in agreement with Ofcom: that the high level of stylization of the show imbues it with a more "entertainment"-like quality and makes it, therefore, less *real* than a "proper" investigation of the paranormal. I would further disagree and align myself with Caldwell, arguing that the excessive stylization of the show—*Most Haunted's* videographic exhibitionism—lays bare the show's construction and therefore, within the televisual tradition of reality TV, increases the veracity of the show's presented evidence. In this regard, Alan Dundes (1980) noted what he terms "the visual metaphor" within American culture, wherein visual ev-

idence is tantamount to ontological proof; what is is what can be *seen* (86). Therefore, by *seeing* the construction of the show, *Most Haunted* attempts to validate its own truth claims regarding its investigations. And those truth claims are largely predicated upon what can be *seen*, that is, the *presentation* of supernatural phenomena, and not the representation of those experiences through the telling of legend narratives and memorates. Therefore, contra Dégh and Vázsonyi and contra Ofcom, I would argue that *Most Haunted* is more than just “entertainment”; it is *ostensive* entertainment.

Conclusion

Ofcom’s report on *Most Haunted* attempts to get itself out of the potentially embarrassing situation of having to comment on supernatural belief traditions in terms of the existence of ghosts without actually commenting on those beliefs. But the regulator’s bias comes through regardless. By way of a conclusion, I want to try to converge several debates presented here—the televising of legend trips as ostension and the nature of reality TV—but by adding a third discourse, the issue of “belief,” within the scholarship pertaining to the supernatural; it is the televising of these belief debates that demonstrates how the convergence of traditional belief and popular media operates. And in many respects, such conclusions also function as conclusions to this entire book.

David Hufford (1995) has noted the marginalization and trivialization of “unofficial beliefs,” that is, “folk” beliefs, or those that “develop and operate outside of powerful social structures” (22). “Official beliefs,” on the other hand, “are promulgated through social structures invested with executive authority, while the beliefs themselves are generally based on claims to cultural authority” (22). Taking this argument further, Leonard Primiano (2001) noted, “The nature of television is that it expresses individuals’ views while simultaneously influencing them. Television media treatment may often trivialize and sensationalize personal experiences of the supernatural, but it can also inspire and inform them” (57). So there is a further dimension to the potential impact a show like *Most Haunted* has and linked with one of the main areas of complaint against the show, that of potentially influencing others to believe in the supernatural. Despite Ofcom’s official refusal to comment on, for all intents and purposes, “folk” beliefs in the supernatural, the assumption that this series is “entertainment,” not “investigation,” attempts to thwart any serious belief in a counterhegemonic belief tradition by trivializing it in a backhanded way. Despite Ofcom’s refusal to appeal directly to those executive authorities (i.e., “the Church”), the reflection of those “official beliefs”

is implicit in its discounting of the spiritualist belief tradition as anything other than “for entertainment purposes.” Hufford (1995) further noted that

while folk beliefs appear in such communication channels [as television programs], they are usually either debunked or at least shown as deviant views that contend with consensual reality. Those media that explicitly propagate some folk beliefs . . . serve to stigmatize them even as they promote them. . . . This illustrates the advantage enjoyed by official beliefs over folk beliefs. (24)

It strikes me that should a television program be developed along the lines of the research of Wiseman and his colleagues noted previously, wherein supernatural phenomena are investigated and explicitly demonstrated to be faked, followed by those believers participating in the show being publicly humiliated for holding “unofficial beliefs,” not only would it be unlikely that any complaints would be made against such a show on the grounds of “fraud,” “deception,” and “potential damage to susceptible viewers,” but Ofcom would probably classify such a show as “investigative” despite a hypothetical use of studio audiences, celebrity presenters, overreactions, and night-vision camera work. In response to the Ofcom report against *Most Haunted*, beginning in 2006, the *Most Haunted Live* broadcasts have now included a disclaimer at the beginning of each broadcast that the following is “for entertainment purposes only.” And, in reiterating Hufford’s point, we again see the advantage of official beliefs over folk beliefs.

The problem is, as Hufford noted in a series of three articles (1982, 1983, and 1985), “traditions of disbelief” dominate academic studies of the supernatural

at a time when scientism, as the ideology of science has been called, has so thoroughly captured the central epistemological terrain that a word such as “rational” has come to mean a proposition with which one would expect a hypothetical modern scientist to agree. (Hufford 1983, 22)

Science, as well as the academy, has no room for ghosts: “First, we may say that traditions of disbelief in modern Western culture . . . operate primarily by criticizing what are believed to be the grounds of the supernatural belief” (Hufford 1982, 48). Research into the paranormal has traditionally appealed to the tenets of “official culture” and its beliefs, therefore assuming an a priori tradition of disbelief in the pseudointerests of “rationality,” “objectivity,” and “science.” Hufford (1983) went even further:

The problem, of course, is that academic disinterest and pure dedication to truth is mere self-deception, as the comparison of scholarship *per se* and schol-

arly ideology helps to demonstrate. The academic biases against supernatural belief are, in fact, primarily ideological in nature, and derive from historical events that are fascinating and important. (25)

This ideology of scientism and its effects on the scholarship of belief are far reaching. Why is skepticism the precedent for research? Why, as again Hufford noted, is even agnosticism toward the supernatural seen as subversive and antagonistic? Why are we, as academics, so negative when it comes to belief (Hufford 1983)? The problem with the a priori assumption of skepticism is that it creates an artificial binary opposition—belief/disbelief—when, as Ellis (2003) noted, disbelief and skepticism are just as significant to the legend process in its dissemination as are believers; we tell stories and thereby pass on the legends even when we *don't* believe.

A television series like *Most Haunted* becomes central to these largely unanswerable questions. Like the legend trip, *Most Haunted* takes the viewer on a rite of passage into the haunted legends the show investigates. Whether we believe in the ability of the psychic mediums to channel the spirits of the dead or even in the presentation of physical phenomena, both the investigating team and the television audience are asked to consider the possibility of the supernatural's existence. As a form of reality TV, the series challenges one's assumptions regarding the various truth claims being made—that this is either paranormal or even “real.” As both Ellis (1981) and Hall (1973) have argued regarding legend trips, neither uncritical belief nor active disbelief is appropriate to the legend trip; all that is asked of both legend trippers and *Most Haunted* viewers is that they “do not *disbelieve*.” “Questions of actual belief or nonbelief are largely irrelevant during the drama and excitement of the trip” (Ellis 1981, 496). Linda Dégh (2001), in discussing the legend genre in general, likened the legend process to a court case with belief on one side and disbelief on the other. However, as she argued, *unlike* a court case, there is rarely any compromise between believers and disbelievers:

Why? Perhaps because the debate in a court of law tackles the affairs of individuals, and is generally limited to personal problems; legends, on the other hand, treat universal concerns. They deal with the most crucial questions of the world and human life. They attack these questions: Is the order of the world really as we learned to know it? Can we expect that life will run its course as we were taught it should? Do we know all the forces that regulate the universe and our life, or are there hidden dimensions that can divert the casual, rational flow of things? And if there are unknown forces, can they be identified, changed, avoided, or exploited to our benefit. (1–2)

Legends, legend trips, explorations into the supernatural, and television programs like *Most Haunted* challenge our understanding of the world we live in. Such challenges may ultimately be dismissed or rejected, but the challenge itself was what was important. Perhaps one of the reasons we tend to react so strongly to the supernatural is that, as Dégh (2001) suggested regarding the legend, it “touches upon the most sensitive areas of our existence” (2). And that is not always comfortable. As Yvette Fielding ends each broadcast of *Most Haunted*, “sleep tight.”

Notes

1. Fielding et al. (2005) noted that “the 2004 Hallowe’en [*Most Haunted Live*] special received higher viewing figures than any programme on terrestrial channels at the time—the first and only time this has happened” (16).

2. It should come as no surprise that there are a number of supernatural reality TV shows. Linda Dégh (2001) noted, “The international demand for trained ghost hunters seems to have emerged around the same time [as the Amityville haunting in the mid-1970s]; *The Ghost Hunter’s Guide* by Peter Underwood, the president and chief investigator of the Ghost Club (founded in 1862), was issued simultaneously in London, New York and Sydney in 1986” (325). Dégh continued, “Recent times have also seen a considerable increase in local psi practitioners, clairvoyants, palmists, and seers. Their prestige has grown through their magazine columns, tabloid prophecies, and above all, their invited assistance of law enforcement agencies in difficult criminal investigations” (325). Yvette Fielding and Ciarán O’Keefe (2006) published a how-to guide, *Ghost Hunters: A Guide to Investigating the Paranormal*, thereby tying the vogue for do-it-yourself ghost hunting into the fandom of their television show.

3. See *Scariest Places on Earth* (ABC Family, 2000–2004) as an example of this style of “supernatural reality TV.”

4. In the research team’s defense, they noted toward the end of their paper that “during our fake séances, participants were not told that the séance would contain genuine paranormal phenomena, nor did the person leading the séance claim to be a medium” (Wiseman et al. 2003, 296).



Afterword

These chapters were written at different times between 1995 and 2007. My hope for this book is to draw a line underneath these preliminary explorations and that future scholarship will develop these ideas—discounting the rubbish and valorizing the decent. I have been fostering new explorations in the convergence of folklore and film studies through two collections I have recently coedited with Sharon Sherman: a special double issue of the journal *Western Folklore* (64:3–4, 2005) and *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film and Vernacular Culture* (2007). The future is looking particularly exciting in the area of folklore and film, and it is one I am very proud to have contributed to.



Filmography

- Airport '79: The Concord* (1979); Directed by David Lowell Rich
Alien (1979); Directed by Ridley Scott
Alligator (1980); Directed by Lewis Teague
Apocalypse Now (1979); Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Avalon (1990); Directed by Barry Levinson
Bambi (1942); Directed by David Hand
Beauty and the Beast (1991); Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise
The Bees (1978); Directed by Alfredo Zacharias
La Belle et la bête [*Beauty and the Beast*] (1946); Directed by Jean Cocteau
Beyond the Poseidon Adventure (1979); Directed by Irwin Allen
Black Christmas (1974); Directed by Bob Clark
The Blair Witch Project (1999); Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez
Bliss (1985); Directed by Ray Lawrence
The Burning (1981); Directed by Tony Maylam
Burnt Offering: The Cult of The Wicker Man (2001); Directed by A. Abbot and R. Leven
Campfire Tales (1997); Directed by Matt Cooper, Martin Kunert, and David Semel
Candyman (1992); Directed by Bernard Rose
Candyman: Day of the Dead (1999); Directed by Turi Meyer
Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh (1995); Directed by Bill Condon
Carrie (1976); Directed by Brian De Palma

Cherry Falls (2000); Directed by Geoffrey Wright
The Curve (1998); Directed by Dan Rosen
Dances with Wolves (1990); Directed by Kevin Costner
Dante's Peak (1997); Directed by Roger Donaldson
Dawn of the Dead (1978); Directed by George A. Romero
Daylight (1996); Directed by Rob Cohen
Dead Man on Campus (1998); Directed by Alan Cohn
Deadly Invasion: The Killer Bee Nightmare (1995); Directed by Rockne S. O'Bannon
The Deer Hunter (1978); Directed by Michael Cimino
Deliverance (1972); Directed by John Boorman
Derek Acorah's Ghost Towns (2005–); Produced by LivingTV
Dumbo (1941); Directed by Ben Sharpsteen
Earthquake (1974); Directed by Mark Robson
L'Enfant Sauvage [The Wild Child] (1969); Directed by François Truffaut
The Evil Dead (1982); Directed by Sam Raimi
Fade to Black (1980); Directed by Vernon Zimmerman
Fantasia (1940); Production supervisor, Ben Sharpsteen
Fatal Attraction (1987); Directed by Adrian Lyne
Fear (2000–2002); Created by Martin Kunert and Eric Manes
Final Exam (1981); Directed by Jimmy Huston
Friday the 13th (1980); Directed by Sean S. Cunningham
Ghost Hunters (2004–); Produced by Sci-Fi Network
The Girly Ghosthunters (2004); Produced by Space: The Imagination Station
Gone with the Wind (1939); Directed by Victor Fleming
Gremlins (1984); Directed by Joe Dante
Halloween (1978); Directed by John Carpenter
Halloween 4 (1988); Directed by Dwight Little
Halloween 5 (1989); Directed by Dominique Othenin-Girard
The Harder They Come (1973); Directed by Perry Henzell
The Harvest (1993); Directed by David Marconi
Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1986); Directed by John McNaughton
How to Make an American Quilt (1995); Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse
I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997); Directed by Jim Gillespie
I Walked with a Zombie (1943); Directed by Jacques Tourneur
Independence Day (1996); Directed by Roland Emmerich
The Joy Luck Club (1993); Directed by Wayne Wang
Kwaidan (1964); Directed by Masaki Kobayashi
The Last Broadcast (1998); Directed by Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler
The Last Picture Show (1971); Directed by Peter Bogdanovich

- Leprechaun* (1993); Directed by Mark Jones
Leprechaun 2 (1994); Directed by Rodman Flender
Leprechaun 3 (1995); Directed by Brian Trenchard-Smith
Leprechaun 4: In Space (1996); Directed by Brian Trenchard-Smith
Maniac (1981); Directed by William Lustig
Meatballs (1979); Directed by Ivan Reitman
Men in Black (1997); Directed by Barry Sonnenfeld
Most Haunted (2002–); Created by Yvette Fielding and Karl Beattie
National Lampoon's Vacation (1983); Directed by Harold Ramis
Night Moves (1975); Directed by Arthur Penn
A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984); Directed by Wes Craven
Nightmares (1983); Directed by Joseph Sargent
Pinocchio (1940); Directed by Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske
Pinocchio's Revenge (1996); Directed by Kevin Tenney
Platoon (1986); Directed by Oliver Stone
The Poseidon Adventure (1972); Directed by Ronald Neame
Prom Night (1980); Directed by Paul Lynch
Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985); Directed by George P. Cosmatos
The Re-Animator (1985); Directed by Stuart Gordon
Revenge of the Zombies (1943); Directed by Steve Sekley
Rumpelstiltskin (1995); Directed by Mark Jones
Scariest Places on Earth (2000–2004); Produced by ABC Family
Scener ur ett äktenskap [Scenes from a Marriage] (1973); Directed by Ingmar Bergman
Schindler's List (1993); Directed by Steven Spielberg
Scream (1996); Directed by Wes Craven
Scream 2 (1997); Directed by Wes Craven
Scream 3 (2000); Directed by Wes Craven
Scream and Scream Again (2000); Directed by Andrew Abbott and Russell Leven
The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988); Directed by Wes Craven
Silent Night Deadly Night (1984); Directed by Charles E. Sellier Jr.
Smokey and the Bandit (1977); Directed by Hal Needham
Snow White: A Tale of Terror (1997); Directed by Michael Cohn
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937); Directed by Ben Sharpsteen
Superman III (1983); Directed by Richard Lester
Supernatural (2005–); Created by Eric Kripke
The Swarm (1978); Directed by Irwin Allen
Terror Train (1981); Directed by Roger Spottiswood
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974); Directed by Tobe Hooper

Three Men and a Baby (1987); Directed by Leonard Nimoy
Tokyo monogatari [*Tokyo Story*] (1953); Directed by Yasujiro Ozu
The Towering Inferno (1974); Directed by Irwin Allen and John Guillerman
The Trouble with Harry (1955); Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Urban Legend (1998); Directed by Jamie Blanks
Urban Legends: Bloody Mary (2005); Directed by Mary Lambert
Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000); Directed by John Ottman
Volcano (1997); Directed by Mick Jackson
Weekend at Bernie's (1989); Directed by Ted Kotcheff
Weekend at Bernie's II (1993); Directed by Robert Klane
When Harry Met Sally (1989); Directed by Rob Reiner
When a Stranger Calls (1979); Directed by Fred Walton
White Zombie (1932); Directed by Victor Halperin
The Wicker Man (1973); Directed by Robin Hardy
The Wicker Man Enigma (2001); Directed by D. Gregory
The Wizard of Oz (1939); Directed by Victor Fleming
The X-Files (1993–2002); Created by Chris Carter
Zombie (1979); Directed by Lucio Fulci



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